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**YANGTZE THE MOTHER RIVER**  
**Photography, Myth and Deep Mapping**

By

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A thesis submitted to Plymouth University  
in partial fulfilment of the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other university award without prior agreement of the Graduate Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken. Relevant seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented; external institutions were visited for consultation purposes.

### **Solo exhibitions:**

2017	Mother River	Gallery of Photography Ireland, Dublin
		Impressions Gallery, Bradford, UK
2015	Mother River	China Three Gorges Museum, Chongqing, China
		Wuhan Art Museum, China
		The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai, China
		Swatch Faces 2015, the 56 <sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Italy
2014	He – River Together	Lianzhou Fotofestival, Lianzhou, China
		Touchstones Gallery, Rochdale, UK

### **Selected group exhibitions:**

2016	Mother River	Dubai Photo Exhibition, UAE
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Mother River                      The 8<sup>th</sup> Three Shadows Photography Annual Award, Beijing  
and Xiamen, China

Mother River              Pondyphoto 2016, Pondicherry, India

2014 Flow – British and Chinese Landscape Artists      Xu Space, Chongqing, China

**Solo exhibition catalogue:**

Preston, Yan Wang, *Mother River* (Self-published in Shanghai, 2015)

**Group exhibition catalogues:**

Duan, Yuting, *Expanded Geographies: 2015 Lianzhoufoto* (Beijing: China Nationality Art  
Photograph Publishing House, 2015)

段，毓婷，扩张的地域：2015 年连州国际摄影节展（北京：中国民族摄影艺术出版社，  
2015） ISBN: 978-7-5122-0762-2

*Dubai Photo Exhibition*, HIPA, UAE, 2016

The Three Shadows Photography Art Centre (compilation), *Immeasurable: The 2016 Three  
Shadows Photography Award Exhibition* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photography Publisher, 2016)

三影堂摄影艺术中心编著，无量 — 2016 年度三影堂奖作品展（杭州：浙江摄影出版社，  
2016） ISBN: 978-7-5514-1388-6

Wells, L (ed.), *Flow: Time, Movement, Change* (Exhibition catalogue for shows at Sichuan Fine  
Art Institute, Chongqing and 501 Xu Space, Chongqing, 2014; Jia Ling Jiang Gallery, Nanchong  
City, China, 2015)

利兹，威尔斯， ‘流’ :时间，移动，变化（展览画册）（重庆市四川美术学院及 501 序空间，2014；南充市嘉陵江美术馆，2015）

The Swatch Ltd (compilation), *Faces & Traces* (Shanghai, 2014)

**Printed publications in specialist photography magazines:**

Source to Sea: Yan Preston in *The RPS Journal*, May 2015/ Volume 155/ Number 5

ISSN: 1468-8670

He, Yining, Walking and Mapping: The Physical Experience of Contemporary Photography, in *Art World*, July 2015

何，伊宁，‘当代摄影的行为体验’，*艺术世界*，2015 年 7 月 ISSN: 1005-7722

Yan Wang Preston, ‘Mother River’, in *Chinese Photography Magazine*, November 2015, pp.

王岩（图文），母亲河，*中国摄影杂志*，2015 年 11 月 ISSN: 0529-6420

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Paper Title: *Mother River*

2013 Land/Water International Symposium, Plymouth University, UK

Paper Title: *Re-mapping the Yangtze River*

Photography and the Expedition Symposium, Plymouth University, UK

Paper Title: *Back Home – Landscape & The Expedition*

2012 Water Image International Visual Arts Conference, Plymouth University, UK

Paper Title: *Water as Tao in Contemporary China?*

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2015	Nomination	Prix Pictet Award
	Selected artist and grant	2015 UK–China Year of Cultural Exchange
2014	Reviewers' Choice Award	FORMAT, Derby, UK
	Clifton Camera Award	FORMAT, Derby, UK
	Genesis Imaging Award	FORMAT, Derby, UK

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**Signature:**

**Yan Wang Preston**

**Date: 15 May 2018**

# Yangtze The Mother River

## Photography, Myth and Deep Mapping

Yan Wang Preston

### Abstract

*'The Yangtze is China's Mother River. It is my Mother River.'* This practice-based PhD research was initially motivated by the researcher's personal search for The Mother River and a critical question in finding her own vision of the river. As the field experiences contradicted the researcher's expectation of The Mother River, the research methodology changed and led to a new, critical understanding: The Mother River is mythic.

This thesis examines the politics and characters of such a myth. It also asks with what research methods and visual strategy can landscape photography interrogate The Mother River myth's complexities. Between 2010 and 2014, the author conducted eight field trips to the Yangtze River. Initially working observationally, it soon became apparent that this method alone was insufficient in reaching an original understanding of the physical and cultural Yangtze landscapes. A series of tactile interventions within the landscapes were then performed and critically evaluated prior to the next phase of the research, in which the entire 6,211 km of the Yangtze River was photographed at precise 100 km intervals. A new body of photographic work titled *Mother River* was produced as a



result. To test its effect in challenging the myth, *Mother River* has been staged in 12 international exhibitions and printed in one complete catalogue. Over 80,000 people visited the shows in China.

Deep mapping, which combines experiential and contextual research with multi-sensorial emplacement as a key method, emerged from this research process and is argued as a new contribution to the field of photographic research. Meanwhile, the artistic output of this research, *Mother River*, is the most systematic documentation of the entire river made by one person since the 1840s. Furthermore, it is argued that using the Y Points System as a physical framework and storytelling a visual strategy, *Mother River* challenges the mythic Yangtze The Mother River with a scale and complexity rarely employed by other photographers.

## Notes to Reader

In this thesis, Pinyin is used to romanise Chinese characters. For example, Guangzhou (广州) is the name used for the city formerly known as Canton. The Chinese personal names follow the Chinese customs of placing the surname first, unless the individual lives in the West and places the surname last. Chinese characters appear for the names of Chinese authors, places and for the Chinese titles of books, journals and articles when they appear for the first time.

I am known in China by my Chinese name Wang Yan (王岩), which was my legal name before adopting my husband's surname and becoming a British citizen. This name is used in most Chinese publications about/of my work. Yan Wang Preston is now my legal name in English.

This thesis is written in English, which is not my native language; I have made every effort to ensure correct spelling and grammar throughout. However, I have opted to keep some elements of my 'Chinglish' – Chinese English – in order to keep the text true to its non-native origin and to some meanings that can only be expressed in this way.

Historical periods in China are typically referred to with their dynastic names. Although such dynasties are not necessarily familiar to some non-Chinese audiences, they are the conventional way to mark historical eras in China. Each dynasty had its own rulers and characters. To make these periods more comparable to Western history, I have also added their Christian era.

The images in this thesis are categorised as follows:

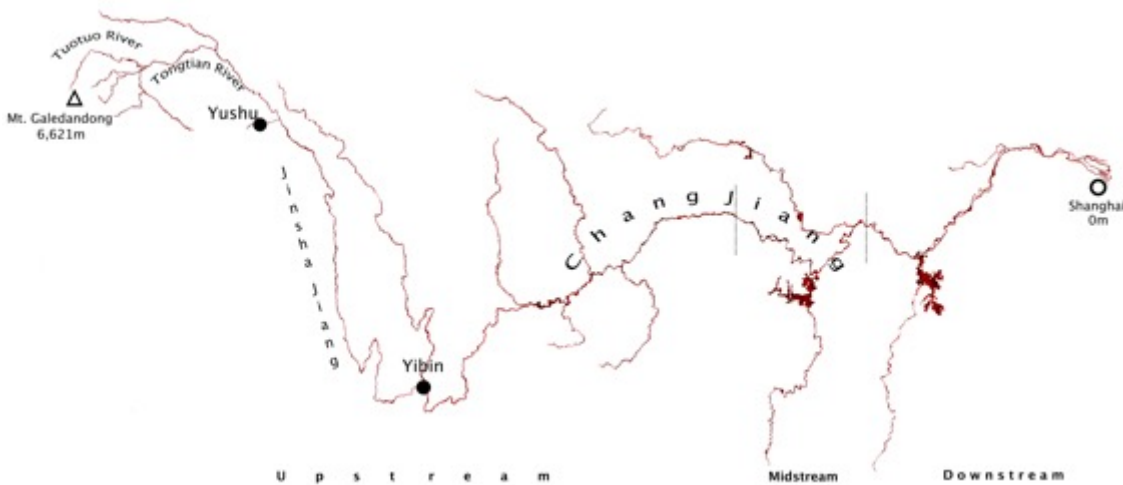
Ref – reference images and other people's work.

Doc – documentations of my own working process, including snapshots, informal images and film stills. All of the ‘Doc’ images are ©Yan Wang Preston, unless otherwise stated.

Map – maps.

Table – tables.

Plate – images considered part of the formal output of my practice. Some of these images belong to the *Mother River* series, while others belong to various other series produced during this research. All of the ‘Plate’ images are ©Yan Wang Preston, unless otherwise stated.



**Map 1** Illustration showing the different sections of the Yangtze River.



**Map 2** Illustration showing the relevant positions of the Yangtze River (the white line) and China (the red area) in a world map.

The Yangtze River has many names. Yangtze is its romanised name commonly used outside of China. In China, it is known as Chang Jiang (长江), which means the Long River. The Yangtze also has regional names which are commonly used in the corresponding regions; for example, Tuotuo He (沱沱河) is the name of the Yangtze headwater originating from the Jianggudiru

Glacier (姜古迪如冰川), the official source of the Yangtze identified by the Chinese government; Tongtian He (通天河) refers to the Yangtze stretch between its confluence location with Dangqu (当曲) and its confluence location with Batang He (巴塘河) in Yushu (玉树); Jinsha Jiang (金沙江, The River of Golden Sand) refers to the Yangtze River stretch between its confluence location with Batang He in Yushu and its confluence location with Min Jiang (岷江) in Yibin (宜宾). The name Chang Jiang is commonly used after its confluence location with Min Jiang, while Chang Jiang is also the official name in China for the entire river. More names exist. For example, the river in Sichuan Province is often referred to as Chuan Jiang (川江). In this thesis, Yangtze is the main name used for the river, while other names are used in the suitable contexts. For example, Tuotuo He will be used if the discussion is about this particular headwater. Both 'He' and 'Jiang' mean 'river' in Chinese.

The Yangtze also has an unusual division between sections: the upstream is exceptionally long at 4,500 kilometres, the midstream is only about 600 kilometres long, and the downstream section is about 1,200 kilometres long.

The river length has not been formally agreed on by different geologists and in various records. In this thesis, I adopted the distance of 6,211 kilometres, which is the measurement given in 2000 by Professor Liu Shaochuang (刘少创) from The Institute of Remote Sensing and Digital Earth, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

## Introduction



**Plate 1 Yan Wang Preston, Y58 5,700 km from the river source. From *Mother River* series (2010–2014).**

This practice-based doctoral project explores how photographic research and practice can effectively interrogate a myth as complex as that of the Yangtze as the Mother River of China.

Within the title, ‘Yangtze The Mother River’, is a direct translation of the Chinese phrase ‘长江母亲河’, which is the common phrase used to refer to the Yangtze River, highlighting its iconic status as the Mother River. Such a ‘Chinglish’ title establishes the research’s cultural roots in China.

Within this research, there was a point in which my methodology changed significantly. My idea of what the project was about also changed. Initially motivated by the personal desire of finding

Yangtze The Mother River by employing observational photography, I was soon conflicted by my field experiences, which showed a landscape opposite to The Mother River's grand and perfect images. Meanwhile, the initial observational methodology was proven insufficient in gaining an original understanding towards the different landscapes. A more holistic research methodology, including tactile embodiment, social interaction, as well as observational and archival research, emerged in order to penetrate the surface of Yangtze's physical landscapes and their misaligned media representations. This thesis is about the changes in my methodology and my findings by employing such methods.

At the end of 2010, this practice-based PhD research was initiated in order to investigate Yangtze The Mother River using the photography skills, knowledge and life experiences that I gained during my first five years living in the UK. The Yangtze River was chosen as a subject because of its iconic status in China as the Mother River. Since then, I have had to overcome three main challenges. The first one was to investigate the exact nature of Yangtze The Mother River in my research context. This was the most difficult task because I had no living experience within or empirical knowledge of the Yangtze environment. I was drawn to the Yangtze River purely by my pre-existing ideas about it, which were shaped entirely by its representations. How to penetrate these ideas and to gain direct experiences as well as insights from the physical, instead of pictorial, Yangtze landscapes became the crux of the task. I began by working as an observing photographer and progressed to being a temporary Yangtze resident who had real bodily and social engagements with the river and its inhabitants. Critical reflection upon my experiences and practices led to a realisation that Yangtze The Mother River is a myth.

The second challenge was to investigate the nature of this mythic Mother River and to identify its main characteristics with a view to interrogating it through photography. Through

archival, historical and contextual research, I reached an understanding that the majority of the Mother River representations consisted of celebratory images of iconic locations and subjects. Vernacular landscapes and mundane places along the river were not part of The Mother River as a cultural construct. Meanwhile, I also argued that the mythical core of Yangtze The Mother River had less to do with the river's 'motherness' than with the naturalisation of modern China's ideology of industrialisation and urbanisation.

The third challenge of this research was to propose and realise a photographic project that had the potential to challenge the myth of the Mother River with its ideological core. The concept of the *Mother River* project, with the 'Y Points System' in which the 6,211-km-long river was photographed at precise 100 km intervals, was drawn from my contextual research into areas such as photography projects subverting myths comparable to The Mother River; critical photography projects focusing on the Yangtze; and my own experiments on the river. The Y Points System aimed at missing the often represented iconic subjects and locations while gaining systematic access to the vernacular sites along the river. These vernacular sites had rich potential to demonstrate the complexities of the Yangtze landscapes, which reflected the physical impact of China's modernisation and multilayered geology, geography and human life along the river. By adopting storytelling as a key visual and editing strategy, such complexities were communicated in the photographic research output *Mother River*. By testing the work in the public realm, its effectiveness at challenging the mythic Yangtze The Mother River was also proven.

## **Part I: Key definitions**

Within the thesis, several key concepts need to be defined.

### **I. Myth**

My understanding of myth is shaped by my own experiences, relevant photographers' work, and theories by academics and historians. In the context of this research, myth has three key elements: nature, ideology and representation. Myth can be fundamental in reflecting a culture's understanding of natural events such as the four seasons or rivers. Schama (1995) narrates on how the unexplained cycle of life, death and resurrection – the secret of life – is the deepest 'mythic unreason' within human unconsciousness that ultimately shapes our ancient and modern societies. Such natural myths are almost as eternal as human culture itself. They run through our histories like invisible veins, linking up time and space.

The Yangtze's powers in giving and taking life provide the foundation of some of the most important natural myths for the Chinese. According to folklore, Da Yu was enthroned as the founding Emperor for China's first Dynasty Xia (夏朝, approximately 2070–1600 BC) because he successfully controlled the Great Floods by dredging the riverbeds and guiding the water to the sea (Lewis, 2006). Meanwhile, the Han Chinese's totem is the mythical animal, dragon, which controls rainfall and floods.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese emperors legitimised themselves by claiming to be the 'sons of dragons'. Such myths demonstrate the political powers of water in traditional Chinese society – the claimed ability to control it naturalises the power to rule.

The ancient myth of life, death and renewal is reflected in modern society's ever-expanding pursuit of progress, development, expansion and profit (Gilloch, 1996). Within the context of China's modernisation, the Yangtze River's eternal flow is now seen as an eternal 'forward' flow. As a powerful analogy, it helps to naturalise China's ideology of industrialisation and urbanisation as the chosen way to progress. Interestingly, under such ideology, the Yangtze's flow itself would have to be interrupted. Damming the Yangtze has become not only an inevitable step to modernise China, but also a political statement of China's determination and ability to go forward under the leadership of the current government. In this way, Yangtze



The Mother River becomes a deep-seated natural myth, which has a strong ideological and political core.

However, a river is just a river, a physical reality, not a myth. It is only through how we think of it, and how this thinking is communicated, that we give physical reality mythical qualities. Roland Barthes (1990) argues for the transition from reality to myth and discovers that representation, shaped by its politics, is the key to naturalisation and to transforming reality into myth. Through this research, I discover that in making the Yangtze into The Mother River of China, the photographic celebration of the Yangtze landscapes, together with its authority as 'a transparent' window of the world, played an important part.

## II. Landscape photography

The primary media adopted for this research is therefore landscape photography, with acknowledged influences from practices associated with the 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*. The term 'landscape' is highly complex and contested. In this thesis, my usage of it includes both the physical landscapes and the landscape images as a result of artists' observation, reflection, aestheticisation, representation and recreation on and of the physical landscapes.

Jackson (1984) writes about the differences between the political and the vernacular landscapes in their physical existence, which has been crucial for my understanding of many other landscape photographers' work as well as the physical Yangtze landscapes. Wells (2011) and Mitchell (1984) write about the politics of landscape imagery, which forms an important part of my critical understanding of landscape photography. Meanwhile, Cosgrove's various texts (1998, 1999) were the initial step for me to start questioning the authority of the

eye as a main sensorial organ in modern society and the role of the photographer as an objective observer.

### III. Modernisation

‘Modernisation’ is a key term used in this thesis to describe China’s current phase of development. Other closely related terms are ‘modernity’ and ‘the modern’. As a Western concept, ‘the modern’ sprung from the Enlightenment discourse in the eighteenth century and became ‘identified with industrialism and the sweeping social, economic and cultural changes associated with it’ (Hall, Held and McLennan, 1992: 2). There are marked differences in how modernity has been developing in China. As discussed in detail by the Chinese writer He Ping (2002), China’s historical, cultural, religious and philosophical backgrounds are different from Western Europe, and these differences have resulted in a different form of modernity. For example, the democratic system widely adopted in most Western countries is not present in China, yet the country is still relatively stable and developing. While ‘modernity’ in the West is primarily in the past tense, it is still evolving in China with uncertain futures. In this thesis, modernisation in China is therefore referred to as its ideology of industrialisation and urbanisation, which is the material, instead of cultural or social, development of the country.

There is no dividing line between traditional and modern China. A common understanding is that the Opium Wars initiated Chinese society’s transition from a traditional to a modern era. The first modern Chinese state was established in 1911 while the current People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 (Spence and Chin, 1996).

### IV. The West

‘The West’ and ‘Western Europe’ are frequently used in this thesis, referring to countries in Western Europe and North America that have their roots in Greco-Roman civilisation and the

advent of Christianity. But within this thesis, the most relevant issues are their advanced degrees of industrialisation as well as their cultural and political systems, which are different from China. Such historical and contemporary differences will influence the way Western photographers perceive China, how they produce their work and how their work is understood in both the West and in China.

## V. Artistic practice as research

Issues around the values and positions of artistic practice within the academic research environment continue to be discussed and remain unresolved (Elkins, 2009; Sullivan, 2005).

As an artist, my own understanding is that not all artistic practices can be understood as 'research' in an academic sense. What turns artistic practice into research is the depth of exploration, as well as how systematic and rigorous that exploration is.

Although it is considered important to be repeatable with consistent and quantifiable results for scientific research findings, the result from artistic practice-based research can be measured differently. The key to artistic research is the embracing of personal historicity and subjectivity with a rigorous and rational reflection as well as thorough contextualisation. The new knowledge produced by such artistic research is therefore qualitative. The same methodology, when applied again by different artists in different contexts, is likely to produce variable results with comparable quality. Meanwhile, one product from artistic research, the artwork, can generate knowledge in a more visual, poetic and ambiguous way which cannot be simply rationalised or written in textual, academic language.

Within this practice-based PhD research, 'practice' refers to the process and the result of my art-making, such as travelling, socialising, planning, intervening, photographing, editing, exhibiting and publishing. Such practice becomes 'raw data' for further analysis while new

meaning is crystallised during the process of reflection and writing. It is impossible to totally separate artistic practice from other forms of research, such as contextual, theoretical and archival research, because they constantly inform each other.

## **Part II: Methodology, methods and process**



**DOC 1** Me making a red circle on the frozen Yangtze headwater, 21 November 2011.



**DOC 2 Me waiting for the light at Y4, 5 November 2013.**

My methodology in this research is primarily based on the experiential and the experimental. During the eight field trips to China between 2010 and 2014, I collected rich information from empirical and social experiences. I experimented with different working methods and produced a range of artworks. I wrote diaries to record and reflect on some of the daily experiences. My experiences, memories, artworks, records and diaries thus form the primary research materials. Theoretical, historical and contextual research was conducted as a way to reflect on the experiences and practices, to reach new understanding and to direct further research.

During the first stage of the research (the first four field trips), I selected different places on the Yangtze River to visit. Such selection was loosely based on their types: the iconic, the vernacular, the new urban and the mythic places. During the second stage of the research (the second set of four field trips), I photographed the entire 6,211 kilometres of the Yangtze River

at precise intervals of 100 kilometres. The resulting work, *Mother River*, has been presented in 12 international exhibitions and published multiple times.

## **Methods employed**

### **1. Mapping photographically**

This method refers to me working as a 'conventional' photographer, experiencing, observing and shooting the topography and occasional happenings in the landscape. It included two trial Point Systems and the formal Y Points System: to photograph five confluences within the Three Gorges area (1<sup>st</sup> field trip); to photograph five locations near Chongqing at 100 km intervals (2<sup>nd</sup> field trip); and to photograph the entire river at the same intervals (5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> field trip). Besides working in such 'systems', I also responded freely to every place visited and photographed them using different strategies. The result of such experiments supported my decision to use the Y Points System in the second phase of the research.

### **2. Emplacement – mapping with the body**

This method refers to a series of bodily and social interventions within the river environment that I conducted in order to collect 'data' from non-visual channels. The resulting artworks include *Yuan* (touching stones and ice at the river source); *Yan* (learning skills from the locals and carving stones by the river side in Tibet); and *Yong* (swimming in the Yangtze River at the metropolis Chongqing). In this phase, this method of 'emplacement' – 'the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment' (Hawes, 2004: 7) – emerged, and this was then consolidated and proved highly effective in interrogating the Mother River myth.

### **3. Contextual mapping**

This method refers to my selected reviews and critical analysis on the history of Yangtze landscape representation, with the emphasis on photographic representation in modern

China, particularly after 1949. China's environmental history and its relevance to the Yangtze River imagery are also touched upon. Such research confirmed my finding in the first four field trips that Yangtze The Mother River was a myth. It also identified some of the key characters of this myth and directed future theoretical research and practice. Meanwhile, successful cases on how landscape photography has challenged myths comparable to Yangtze The Mother River are also reviewed and provide examples of methods and aesthetics that I have adapted in my own work.

## **Part II: Thesis structure**

The structure of this thesis does not follow a chronological order. Instead, each of the five chapters covers a key area relating to this research's theoretical foundation, artistic contexts, methods and outputs. Together, they form an interconnected argument, contributing to the conclusion of this research's original contribution to knowledge.

In chapter I, I argue that Yangtze The Mother River is a myth instead of a fact. The chapter briefly reviews the historical Yangtze River landscape representation in China before concentrating on the river's photographic representation after 1949. Attention is paid to the politics of such representation while comparisons between different understandings of the river are made between the traditional and the modern eras. China's environmental history and its modern vision to develop the Yangtze River are also looked into. This chapter draws several conclusions. Among them, the main one is that the Yangtze The Mother River can be understood as a myth naturalising China's ideology of modernisation. The chapter also identifies two key characters of this myth: photographic idealisation and regional/location hierarchy, which in turn serve as the target for my following photographic subversion of the mythic Mother River. The chapter also discovers that the Shanshui landscape paintings do not reflect the environmental reality of traditional China and cannot be used as evidence for an

imagined harmony between humanity and nature. This lays the foundation for a critical reading of many contemporary photographic works on the Yangtze River.

In chapter II, I review the examples of work by photographers who use mapping as their central methods and aesthetics. Within this context, the term 'mapping' is used in connection with geological mapping in several ways. It can be a systematic exploration of previously unexplored physical areas. It can also be an aesthetic built on the authority of modern science, which places the objective vision and the eye as the preferred sensory organ to receive information from the external world. This chapter analyses mapping photography's effective subversion towards various myths comparable to Yangtze The Mother River and identifies it as my main artistic lineage. Meanwhile, the chapter also detects the limits in such an apparently objective approach while anticipating other ways of engaging with the landscape.

In chapter III, I select historical and contemporary photographic practices with the Yangtze River as case studies. This chapter outlines the international context of my practice while discussing the complexity and politics embedded in the international dissemination of the Yangtze imagery. This chapter identifies some of the key areas still missing in contemporary critical photography practices on the Yangtze. For example, photographers have frequently questioned the scale of China's modernisation and its destructive effect on traditional landscapes, national/personal identities and existing ecologies. However, the mythic nature and the complexity of Yangtze The Mother River have not seen systematic interrogation. Meanwhile, a prevalent preference towards selected areas on the river and its political landscapes continues to exist. The chapter concludes that a systematic investigation of the vernacular landscapes with emphasis on their multilayered complexity can be one way to form a new challenge towards the Mother River myth.



In chapter IV, I critically review the experiences and practices during the first four field trips. This chapter draws several conclusions. The first is an artistic realisation that Yangtze The Mother River is a mythical construct, which is then justified through the research in chapter I. The second conclusion relates to the photographic research method. Having discussed my doubts about the photographer's role as an objective observer briefly in chapter I, this chapter argues that bodily and social interventions instead of pure observation can provide critical insights into the landscape that cannot be accessed by any other means. Meanwhile, the chapter clarifies my personal position in relation to the Yangtze River landscapes and this research – I am both a cultural insider and an outsider. It is from this unique position that I am undertaking the research. Such 'discoveries' further influenced the strategies for the next research phase in which the subjective, the personal and the unpredictable are actively embraced.

In chapter V, I summarise the making of the *Mother River* project as the formal artistic output of this research. Following a Y Points System, I photographed the entire 6,211 kilometres of the Yangtze River at precise 100-kilometre intervals and presented the work in the forms of a photobook and exhibitions. By reflecting on my pictorial and editorial strategy as well as external evidence collected from exhibition visitors, I argue that the *Mother River* project has provided a critical commentary on the physical impact of China's modernisation from a new and different angle.

I conclude by re-examining the journeys made for Mother River field research and for writing up the thesis. The research implications discuss what I am at the point of submitting the thesis in my understanding of photography and my understanding of intellectualising photography. Meanwhile, I summarise my original contribution to knowledge lies in three areas. The first one is combined experiential and contextual research with 'emplacement' as a key method in which the

photographer is an observer, intervener, local resident and researcher. Secondly, *Mother River* is the first photographic work that has systematically documented the entire Yangtze River by one person since Yangtze photography began in the 1940s. Thirdly, using storytelling as a visual and editorial strategy, *Mother River* offers a unique insight into the physical impact of China's modernisation on its vernacular landscapes while opening up the complexities of this transformation process. Other contemporary photographers who have critically observed the Yangtze landscapes have not adopted this strategy to its full scale or complexity.

## Chapter I

### Yangtze The Mother River

*You come from the Snow Mountains; the spring tides are your colours.  
You ran towards the East Sea, the mighty waves are your sizes.  
With your sweet milk, you bring up sons and daughters from all ethnic groups.  
With your strong shoulders, you support the mountains and oceans.  
We praise the Long River; you are the ever-flowing spring;  
We are attached to the Long River; you have the heart of a Mother.*

*You come from the antiquity, washing dust with your great waves.  
You go towards the future, wakening the universe with your roaring water.  
With your pure flows, you fertilise our country of flowers.  
With your vigorous strength, you push our time forward.  
We praise the Long River; you are the ever-flowing spring;  
We are attached to the Long River; you have the heart of a Mother.*

*Song of the Long River ( 长江之歌 ), the theme song for Discovering the Long River ( 话说长江 )*  
(my translation)

In 1983, China Central Television (CCTV) broadcast a 25-episode documentary *Discovering the Long River*. Following the entire river from its newly mapped source, the film introduced its geology, geography, history and culture. It pictured a vast country with enduring traditions, iconic landscapes and a bright, modernising future. While television sets were beginning to gain popularity in ordinary households, for the first time in history, the Chinese people in different regions could see their entire modern country filmed in such a systematic manner. And the theme song, *Song of the Long River*, distilled the Chinese vision of the river at the time.<sup>2</sup> In this vision, the Yangtze is idealised. It is as pure and grand as the snow mountains at its source and as eternal and broad as the ocean at its mouth. It was a river of unification, linking the diverse cultures and borderlands into one single country under one party's leadership. It was a river with a history and a sure forward flow, taking China with it to become a new world power. In this song, the Yangtze is much more than a physical river: it is our Mother River, a national icon held in most Chinese people's consciousness.

In 1983, I was seven years old and living in a small town in Henan Province in China, a long way away from the Yangtze or any major city. With my neighbours, I eagerly watched the documentary on a small black-and-white TV. Accompanied with the heroic theme song, Yangtze as The Mother River began to be inscribed in my young mind, alongside imagery of powerful symbols such as the snowy mountains and the ocean. The song subsequently got to number one in the charts and became a household tune in China. In May 2016, I played it during a talk at Leeds University to a group of Chinese overseas students. All born after 1990, they recognised the song instantly while nodding to me with a knowing smile. The Mother River endures.

In 2010, having lived in England for five years, I returned to China to photograph the Yangtze River for this PhD research. Standing by the river in the famous Three Gorges, I was astonished by the differences between the landscape in front of me, a world of chaotic construction on top of brutal destruction, and the landscapes portrayed in *Song of the Long River*. How to understand the two types of landscapes, and crucially, their differences, became an urgent task for me. In the next two years, I conducted a series of photographic experiments, multisensory interventions and contextual research. A realisation was made at the end of this period: that Yangtze The Mother River was a constructed myth infused with China's ideology of modernisation. While my practice is critically reflected in chapters IV and V, this chapter is the result of my contextual research into the geology, geography, history modern development and landscape imagery of the Yangtze River. The purpose of this research is to find out how the Mother River myth was constructed and what its main characters are. The content of this chapter therefore forms an important part of the overall contextual research, which directly influenced my photographic strategy in the second phase of my practice.

## Part I: Essential facts and figures about the Yangtze River



Map 3 A map of China. The blue line is the Yangtze River. Image downloaded from [http://www.discoveryyangtze.com/Yangtzediscovery/photo/map\\_china.jpg](http://www.discoveryyangtze.com/Yangtzediscovery/photo/map_china.jpg) on 11 February 2011.

The Yangtze collects its first drops of water from the glaciers formed at the 6,621-metre high Mount Geladandong (各拉丹东雪山), the heartland of the Tibetan Plateau. On its 6,211-kilometre journey to the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the river flows east for the first 700 kilometres, then turns south for about 1,400 kilometres. At Shigu (石鼓) in Yunnan Province (云南省), the river hits a limestone mountain called Yun Ling (云岭). With nowhere to go from here, it makes a fantastic U-turn and thunders its way back up north briefly, then makes up its mind to go east, all the way to Shanghai (上海).

On its way, the river's mainstream links 11 provinces and municipal cities, including Tibet, Qinghai (青海省), Sichuan (四川省), Yunnan, Chongqing (重庆), Anhui (安徽省), Hubei (湖北省) and Shanghai. With its 700 tributaries, another eight provinces are drained from the

river's catchment. This means the Yangtze has a direct impact on 19 out of the 34 provinces in China!

Furthermore, there are huge differences in all aspects of life along the river, particularly in the degrees of industrialisation and modernisation. For example, in its source area, the vast Tibetan Plateau sees less than one person per square kilometre. A nomadic way of life is still carried out by the Tibetans. At its mouth, Shanghai, one of the most 'developed' Chinese cities, has over 2,500 people per square kilometre. Its cosmopolitan way of life does not differ much from that of London or New York. To borrow the words of the geographer Simon Winchester (1996), to travel along the Yangtze is to travel back into Chinese time. The river's scale and diverse regions make it an ideal case to study the whole of inner China.

The Yangtze River is central to Chinese civilisation. Hemudu Site (河姆渡遗址), the earliest human settlement discovered by archaeologists in the Yangtze catchment, is dated at being 7,000 years old, from the Neolithic Age. The Tristar Piles (三星堆), discovered near Chengdu (成都), reveal a highly sophisticated culture established near the Yangtze as early as 5,000 years ago. For more than 2,000 years, the river has served as major transportation routes, boundaries, connections, and battlefields for many generations of the Chinese kingdoms. The legendary novel *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), based on true historical events from the third century AD, is largely about the kingdoms' battles along the Yangtze in order to unify China. Regarded as one of the four great classic novels in China, its influence cannot be overstated. Many of the figures in it have become household names, some even becoming mythic, made into statues and worshipped as Gods in numerous temples.

As the country developed, the river became its most important channel for trade and navigation. Since the sixth century, the approximately 200-kilometre stretch between a port called 'Yangtze' (扬子港) and the river mouth gradually became a popular international trading route. Western missionaries and traders followed it to inland China from its east coast. This is how the name 'Yangtze' became known. The Yangtze port has long been silted up and is no longer in use. The name stays, however, particularly in the West. Trading has remained forever active along the middle and lower stretch of the river, making this area the richest in the country.

The river is the channel for the Chinese to reach out and for foreign influences to reach in. In the fifteenth century, the Chinese explorer Zheng He (郑和) set sail from Liujia port (浏家港), 100 kilometres inland from the modern river mouth, to conduct his epic journeys around the Pacific Ocean to trade and spread the influence of the Ming Dynasty (明朝, 1368–1644).

Considering the river's central position in China, Western colonial powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were aware that to control China, they needed to control the Yangtze River. The results of treaties and invasions transformed Shanghai from a fishing village to a modern metropolis. In the mid-twentieth century, the Japanese invasion followed the Yangtze River in their bid to conquer China. Their powerful military actions were finally obstructed by the difficult channel of the Three Gorges (三峡).

In the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, the Yangtze River has become even more important to China's development. As advocated by the Chinese economist Dai Zhikang (戴志康), 'the whole Yangtze River can support half of China's population. China's future lies along the Yangtze' (2003: 4). With the economic reform in 1978, Shanghai again became the pioneering city to influence the entire Yangtze catchment. This resulted in the rise

of Pudong District (浦东新区), the new landmark of ultimate modernisation in China. In 1994, construction began on the world's largest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam (三峡水电站). In 1997, the river city of Chongqing (重庆), 2,500 kilometres inland from Shanghai, was made a municipal city and became the strategic centre for China to develop its vast western area. In 2005, construction finished on Yangshan Port(洋山深水港), the largest container port in China, located just outside of Shanghai, maximising the navigation potential of the river.

Today, over 30% of China's population (over 400 million people) live in the Yangtze's catchment, which contributes 36% of China's water resource and 40% of its GDP, and helps irrigate over 50% of the country's crops. In addition to the Three Gorges Dam, around 30 other hydroelectric dams are planned, under construction, or have been completed on the Yangtze River. The development of the river has only just begun.

Daniels remarks that the 'national identities are coordinated, often largely defined, by "legends and landscapes", by stories of golden ages, enduring traditions, heroic deeds and dramatic destinies located in ancient or promised homelands with hallowed sites and scenery' (1993: 5). As the above overview can already demonstrate, the Yangtze River has a high concentration of such 'legends, hallowed sites and landscapes', which is why it is deeply embedded in China's internal and external identities. As an identity, Yangtze The Mother River is constructed with the influences of certain ideologies within certain contexts. In the next section, I will use the lyrics of *Song of the Long River* as a case study to analyse the nature of Yangtze The Mother River.



## Part II: *Song of the Long River*

In this section, I critically analyse the lyrics of *Song of the Long River* in order to expose the mythic nature of Yangtze The Mother River. The forming of such a myth is a long and complex process that cannot be attributed to one song or one television programme. However, *Discovering of the Long River* and its theme song were disseminated in China at a pivotal time when the idea of The Mother River reached its climax within the context of China's large-scale economic and industrial transformation. The influence of the documentary is deeply felt while its idea is crystallised in the song, which is why I use this song as a case study in this thesis.

### 1. A united China

*Song of the Long River* pictures China as a country 'naturally' united by the long course of the Yangtze River where different ethnic groups live happily together. As a political, geographical, cultural and ethnic concept, 'China' is in fact a highly contested and completely unnatural concept. Three thousand years ago, China was a small town in Shanxi Province (陕西省) within the lower catchment of the Yellow River (黄河), where the King of Zhou resided and ruled many small (semi-) independent communities, towns and kingdoms (Wang, 2002). By the Qing Dynasty (清朝, 1636–1912), China's territory reached one of its maximum sizes, combining previous borderlands including Tibet and Xinjiang (新疆) in the west, Mongolia (蒙古) in the north and Taiwan (台湾) in the south, therefore covering the entire Yangtze catchment. In 1951, when Tibet became part of the administration system of the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC), the PRC managed to recover most of the Chinese territory inherited from the Qing Dynasty (Gu and Shi, 2015).

Fifty-six ethnic groups inhabit the China that we know now; among them, the majority is Han, who make up around 90% of the current Chinese population.<sup>3</sup> Although China had been

occasionally invaded and ruled by other ethnic groups, such as the Mongols who established the Yuan Dynasty (元朝, 1271–1368) and the Manchu who established the Qing Dynasty, the origin and the majority of the Chinese population has always been Han. The concept of China is always implied with Han culture as the dominant and superior culture, particularly when the ruling group is made up of Han Chinese, for example in the Tang (618–907) and Ming Dynasties, and in contemporary China. The name China, 中国, literally means ‘the central kingdom’, which implies a regional hierarchy. The areas that Han Chinese traditionally resided, starting off from the lower Yellow River catchment while gradually expanding towards the south to reach the lower Yangtze catchment, are traditionally seen as the central and core area of the country. Other areas, such as Tibet in the west and Inner Mongolia in the north, are mainly inhabited by ethnic minorities and are seen as the ‘borderlands’. I am Han Chinese and aware of such ethnic and regional hierarchies within the idea of China. Meanwhile, it is inevitable that my personal understanding of China is influenced by my own cultural heritage, the Han culture.

Current China is a result of the central Han China’s imperial, political and cultural expansion to its borderlands and ethnic minorities with a particular ideology. Some of these ethnic groups might not necessarily identify themselves as ‘Chinese’, or at least they might be less willing than Han Chinese. Such conditions expose the idea that China, as a political unity, is not natural. To argue that the country is as natural as the river is to accept a naturalised myth that China is the river.

## 2. An all-loving ‘Mother’

*Song of the Long River* portrays the Yangtze as an all-loving and all-giving mother without defects. However, the Yangtze itself not only gives but also takes life. Its notorious floods can be used as an example. With its large water volume, specific geology and the environmental

damage caused by agricultural development, the Yangtze has a tendency to flood frequently. Over the last two millennia, the Yangtze flooded over 200 times, once every ten years on average. Life by the Yangtze involves constant battles against the floods. In 1870, the Yangtze saw one of its worst floods, during which China's most fertile agricultural plains in Sichuan, Jiangxi, Hubei, and Hunan provinces were under as much as 10 metres of water. The damage took the country over ten years to recover. During the 1930s, two devastating Yangtze floods claimed over 300,000 lives. To defend against damage, as early as the fourth century, the Chinese government began to build embankments along the river. Such efforts continue to this day, and the embankment has reached a length of over 4,000 kilometres – almost as long as the Great Wall of China. The existence of the embankment is a living reminder of the Yangtze's forces.<sup>4</sup>

Human history along the Yangtze has not been peaceful either. The Yangtze River has always been a battleground and strategic military location throughout Chinese history. As early as the third century, the sixty-year wars between the Three Kingdoms of Wei (魏), Shu (蜀) and Wu (吴) were largely fought on and along the Yangtze River. In the twelfth century, brutal battles between the invading Jin and the Southern Song took place on the river, with 700,000 to 800,000 soldiers mobilised (Wang, 2002). In the nineteenth century, various locations on the river, such as Jinzhu Guan (金柱关) in Anhui Province, became the front line between the Qing government army and the Taiping Rebellion. Powerful modern cannons imported from the West were employed to destroy Taiping's less-advanced ships. The river was filled with fire and blood. Battles lasting a few months resulted in the seizing of Jinzhu Guan by the government army, and this consequently led to the end of Taiping's 14-year history (Spence, 1997). Similar to the floods, such violent events on the Yangtze River were not part of the Mother River image. To picture The Mother River as an all-loving mother is to conceal such natural and historical complexities. In *Song of the Long River*, the Yangtze is portrayed side by

side with China as '*the country of flowers*'. In this way, the river and the country are both idealised with its history denied.

### 3. Yangtze taking China forward

*In Song of the Long River*, the Yangtze is '*pushing our time forward*' with its '*vigorous strength*'.

In such lines, the Yangtze's powerful flow becomes an analogy of China's development: the country is simply following nature's lead. Interestingly, in traditional China, the Yangtze is most often seen as an 'eternal' river instead of a 'forward-flowing' river. Meanwhile, China's modern development will ruthlessly interrupt the river's flow by damming it systematically. Clearly, the river would not have called for such an act of self-destruction.

While these two aspects of the Yangtze story, in traditional and modern China respectively, will be discussed in detail in the following sections, one fact is beginning to surface. Yangtze the Mother River portrayed in *Song of the Long River* is in fact concealing the historical, geographical, political and ideological complexities embedded in each of the concepts: the 'Yangtze', 'China', 'Mother' and 'river'. 'Mother' is used as a metaphor to describe the Yangtze's life-giving quality; however, this 'Mother' is an idealised one. To use the Yangtze as an icon for China is to borrow the former's historical, cultural and natural significance. To argue that China, as a naturally united political entity, is going forward with the river's flow is to naturalise China and its modernisation ideology. On this level, Yangtze The Mother River becomes a myth with a modern ideological core.

### Part III: Yangtze landscapes in traditional China



Ref 1 Wang Wei (王维), *The Yangtze River with Snow* (长江积雪图) (part 1 of 8). Image downloaded from <http://vr.theatre.ntu.edu.tw/fineart/painter-ch/wangwei/wangwei-02-01x.jpg>, accessed on 02 November 2016.



Ref 2 Wang Wei (王维), *The Yangtze River with Snow* (长江积雪图) (part 4 of 8). Image downloaded from <http://vr.theatre.ntu.edu.tw/fineart/painter-ch/wangwei/wangwei-02-04x.jpg>, accessed on 02 November 2016.

In this section, I will briefly review the representation of the Yangtze landscape in traditional China. This review has two purposes: one is to identify the historical roots of the Yangtze's iconic status and the characters of its landscape representation in traditional China, and the other one is to critically discuss the relationship of Shanshui paintings with the landscape reality in traditional China. The latter will become a foundation in my subsequent review of



many contemporary photographers' work in chapter III, which criticises the development of China by mythifying traditional China.



Ref 3 Wang Shimin (王时敏), *Falling Leaves and River Sails* (落木江帆), Scanned image from Wang, Shimin, *Chinese Classical Masters Collection: Wang Shimin* (Beijing: The People's Fine Art Publisher, 2003) 王时敏, *中国古代名家作品选粹* 王时敏 (北京: 人民美术出版社, 2003).

The first concentrated period in which the Yangtze River imagery appeared was around the time of the Tang Dynasty (唐朝, 618–907) in the forms of classic poetry and Shanshui paintings. It was within the second half of the river, particularly the Three Gorges and below, where some great Chinese poets resided, travelled, and composed. In their words, the Long River was frequently celebrated as nature's power and beauty, as well as a foundation to

contemplate the eternity of the river's flow and of time itself. Li Bai (李白, 701–762), one of the greatest poets in Chinese history, wrote in *Through the Yangtze Gorges*:

*From the walls of Baidi high in the coloured dawn  
To Jiangling by nightfall is three hundred miles,  
Yet monkeys are still calling on both banks behind me  
To my boat these ten thousand mountains away.*

(*300 Tang Poems*, translated by Witter Bynner, 2014, Kindle Book, Location 6401)

The poem describes a day spent travelling downstream on the Yangtze from Baidicheng (白帝城) along the Three Gorges to a small, historical town called Jiangling (江陵), approximately 500 kilometres away. Within four concise lines, Li Bai celebrates the river's fast flow (the long distance covered in one day), its nature (monkeys), and its landscapes of colourful clouds and layers of mountains. The poem also references the long human history of the area by mentioning Baidicheng as the departure location.

Another great Tang Dynasty poet, Du Fu (杜甫, 712–760), also visited Kuizhou (夔州), where Baidicheng is located, and left a famous poem:

*A Long Climb*

*In a sharp gale from the wide sky apes are whimpering,  
Birds are flying homeward over the clear sky and white sand,  
Leaves are dropping down like the spray of a waterfall,  
While I watch the Long River always rolling on...*

(*300 Tang Poems*, translated by Witter Bynner, 2014, Kindle Book, Location 5094)

Again, this poem concisely describes the landscape. The sentiment brought by the seasonal change from autumn to winter is compared with the endless flow of the Yangtze River. The atmosphere, emotions and landscapes are depicted together to provide a mental image to the readers. Such aesthetics were established in the Tang Dynasty and were adapted by the

following generations and became part of the Chinese landscape tradition in the literature (and visual) form (Mei, 2001).

Hundreds and possibly thousands of travelling poets then followed Li Bai's and Du Fu's footsteps. They stood on Baidicheng and admired the landscape of Kuimen (夔门) before sailing through the Three Gorges while composing poems celebrating the beauty, power and eternity of the river. The gentle landscape below the Three Gorges, with its rolling hills, misty weather and large expanses of water surface composed of rivers and lakes, is also frequently described and celebrated. In the Northern Song Dynasty (北宋, 960–1127), Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989–1052), a prominent politician and literati figure, wrote in the famous prose

*Yueyanglou Ji* (岳阳楼记, *Notes on the Yueyang Tower*):

*The beauty of Baling centres around Dongting Lake, which holds the mountain ranges in the distance and swallows the water of the Yangtze River. It is so vast and mighty that it seems boundless. Dazzling in the morning sun and fading in the grey evening mist, it offers a myriad of scenes....In the rainy season, an unbroken spell of wet weather lasts for months. Chilly winds howl and turbid waves surge sky high. The sun and the stars lose their lustre, and the mountain ranges are scarcely visible.*

(My translation)

Built on a small hill at the confluence of the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake (洞庭湖), Yueyang Tower was another well-known place to take in the broad view of this vast expanse of water. Fan Zhongyan's poem so successfully captured the landscapes in different weather conditions and seasons that it is widely celebrated and studied. Interestingly, Fan actually had never been to Yueyang Tower. His friend Teng Zijing (滕子京), the local governor of Yueyang City at the time, invited him to write some prose to celebrate the refurbishment of the tower and sent him a painting, *Late Autumn at Dongting Lake* (洞庭晚秋图), as a reference.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, Fan Zhongyan's description of the dramatic landscape is entirely built on his imagination and probably materials collected from previous poems about the location (for example, Li Bai composed one of the earliest and most well-known poems about Yueyang Tower).



That such a text may not be based on actual experiences at the depicted site is a shared factor between Chinese classic poems/prose and Shanshui paintings, which were often created by the same literati painter-poet-government official. The two art forms were seen as interchangeable. Shanshui first took root in the East Jin Dynasty (东晋, 317–420) when China's capital was moved to Nanjing, a city by the Yangtze 300 kilometres away from modern Shanghai (Cahill, 1976). In the following Jin and Tang dynasties when Shanshui saw major developments, the Yangtze River became a popular subject portrayed by many influential painters. Of these, the poet-painter-prime-minister Wang Wei's (王维, 701–761) long scroll, *The Yangtze River with Snow* (长江积雪图), was considered an early masterpiece. His horizontal composition with pure black ink and wash techniques became the model that eventually established the Southern School of Shanshui paintings. Painters living in the wealthy midstream and downstream areas of the Yangtze River attributed numerous paintings to the Yangtze River.

Do these paintings represent the physical landscape of the Yangtze River in this region at the time? Can they be understood as historical documents, at least partially, that demonstrate how traditional China's river topography looked? These are complex questions. As discussed by many art historians and researchers such as Tuan (1995), Sullivan (1979) and Cahill (1996), the literati painted Shanshui to momentarily retreat from the society and to unite with 'Tao'. Their symbolic portrayal of the harmonic universe is precisely aimed at escaping from the realities of social responsibility, bureaucracy and urban life. The 'river' in their paintings is a general concept of nature and Tao, not a physical waterway. These painters did not desire a realistic representation of the physical landscape. What they painted on the rice paper was not a 'view' perceived by the human eye, but a mental landscape, similar to Fan Zhongyan's dramatic 'depiction' of the landscape at Yueyang Tower.

But some painters did go out to observe nature before building the experiences into their paintings. Painters were encouraged to experience the real mountains and waters. By doing so, they can gain insights into the laws of the universe, therefore ensuring such laws are reflected in their paintings (Pan, 2010). As a result, although all Shanshui are entirely constructed landscape images, many do reflect the topographic characteristics of real places. My own travelling experiences confirm this. Physical landscapes of the gorges where waterfalls plunge directly into the river underneath, and of the water and sky merging together with the persistent autumn mist can often find resemblance in Shanshui. This partial topographic resemblance may give some foundation to a false impression that Shanshui paintings represent a traditional China where humans and their environment were in harmony.

Shanshui's relationship to the landscape reality in traditional China can be investigated by comparing them with the environmental conditions at the time. Dr Wang Weiluo (1998) writes that in ancient times, the Yangtze rarely flooded. However, since 801 AD, the Chinese began to invade the river space by building embankments, reclaiming land from the lakes and farming on the mountain slopes in valleys. Meanwhile, large-scale deforestation, which had begun in ancient times, reached its peak after 1949. All such actions interrupted the natural flow of the river and caused severe loss of surface soil. The increased amount of silt raised the riverbed dramatically and further increased the risks of flooding.<sup>6</sup> The environmental historian Elvin (2006) also states that by the eighteenth century, China's environmental degradation was worse than Western Europe's. However, the Shanshui paintings remained essentially the same as those of the eighth century. For example, in the Shanshui by Wang Shimin (王时敏, 1592–1680), although the scene is anonymous, the inscribed poem does refer to the Yangtze: *'Leaves are dropping down like the spray of a waterfall While I watch the Long River always rolling on'* (from the poem *A Long Climb* by Du Fu that I quoted previously).

Sontag (1979) remarks that every time something is photographed, its 'soul' or its 'aura' grows. The same can be applied to the Yangtze River. Every time a painting is attributed to it, its 'soul' grows. Over 1,000 years of repeated references to the Yangtze River has produced several results. The first is the tendency to mythify Yangtze landscapes. To the painters, Shanshui paintings may be a philosophical abstraction. Their creations were circulated between themselves as entertainment instead of public education. However, when Shanshui is viewed without its historical context and politics, it is possible to confuse it with the landscape reality of China at the time. The idealised, harmonious world described by Shanshui may be understood as being how traditional China was, which is entirely mistaken.

Secondly, with repeated attribution to and celebration of the Yangtze landscapes and stories, many real locations on the river, such as the Three Gorges, became iconised. This gives the foundation for an important concept in Chinese landscape aesthetics and depiction: *Jing* (景). Generally speaking, *Jing* refers to an iconic view – a location and/or a landscape that is widely accepted as having cultural and aesthetic significance (Wu, 2011).<sup>7</sup> The appreciation of *Jing* is stereotyped, and dictates not only what to see but also how to see and how to understand the view. The *Jing* of Kuimen (the upstream entrance to Qutang Gorge, 瞿塘峡), the layers of mountains with their shapes fading gradually, the red autumn leaves in Xiling (西岭峡) and Wu Gorge (巫峡), the mist and the large expansion of water that merges into the sky seamlessly all became part of this *Jing* heritage for the Yangtze River. They were carried into the photographic depiction of the Yangtze River in modern China and formed the historical foundation of images for The Mother River.

It is clear to see that the cultural understanding of the Yangtze River, reflected in traditional Chinese poems and landscape paintings by the literati as a class of social elite, bears little

resemblance to the river depicted in *Song of the Long River* quoted at the beginning of this chapter. To the literati, the river is considered part of the eternal universe and time. Its flow rolls by endlessly, but not forward. It was not an analogy for a politically unified China, despite the fact that China at the time already had many different ethnic groups within its centralised administration system. Without the aid of modern printing and media, the poems and paintings were probably consumed within the community of their literati creators. To a large degree, the Yangtze imagery in traditional China is philosophical rather than ideological. But this was to change in modern China.

#### **Part IV: Yangtze landscapes in modern China: 1949-1980s**

In this section, I review the major development in the representation of the Yangtze landscape, namely photography, within the context of modern China while focusing on the period after 1949. My argument is that as a mythic idea, Yangtze The Mother River was crystallised within this era and was used to naturalise China's modernisation ideology and its political unity. Photographic representation of selected Yangtze landscapes contributed to form this myth, with its realism, its reference to the past, and its powerful dissemination through modern media and China's propaganda network. As a result, hierarchies between river places were reinforced while celebratory images of old and new iconic views, *Jing*, continue to dominate the representation of the Yangtze River. Vernacular landscapes continue to be missing from the idea and 'portfolio' of The Mother River.

The most significant change in the depiction of the Yangtze landscape in modern China is the application of photography (and by extension, films), which is embedded in the modern information dissemination system under the wider context of China's long and difficult search for modernity.<sup>8</sup> Within this search, the Yangtze River has always been a crux for the various stages of modernisation. The most visible change in managing the river is China's ability to dam its main course.

Since the early stages of China's modernisation in the 1840s, the British navy and other colonial powers began to chart the Yangtze with a view to develop and control steam-powered navigation on it. The Three Gorges, with its treacherous water, became the battlefield between man and steam power. The competition was fierce between different forces: the various colonial powers, China's own shipping companies and the traditional boats. The battle for navigating the river with steam engine became one symbol for China's independent development into a modern country.<sup>9</sup>

In 1911, the Qing imperial court was thrown out and the first modern China state, the Republic of China, was established. Modernisation in the ways of industrialisation and Western democracy, with the model of Western Europe and Northern America, was adopted as modern China's founding ideology (Spence and Chin, 1996). Soon afterwards, in 1920, the revolutionary and political leader for modern China, Sun Zhongshan (孙中山, also known as Sun Yet-san, 1866–1925) completed his three-part text, *Method and Strategies of Establishing the Country* (建国方略). Within the publication, the chapter *The International Development of China* discussed much about developing and damming the Yangtze River.<sup>10</sup> In 1921, the Yangzijiang Committee (扬子江委员会) was established to manage the river on a national level.<sup>11</sup> In 1944, American hydroelectric engineer John Lucian Savage was invited by the Chinese Nationalist government to conduct field research at the Three Gorges in order to design a 'dream dam'.<sup>12</sup> But the Sino-Japanese Wars and the Civil Wars prevented the realisation of such plans. The PRC, founded in 1949 by the China Communist Party (CCP), continued China's quest to tame the Yangtze. Between 1970 and 1988, China completed construction of the small-scale Gezhouba Dam (葛洲坝) just below the Three Gorges as a protocol for a much more ambitious project: the Three Gorges Dam. The latter was constructed between 1997 and 2010. The Three Gorges Dam is the result of China's ambition to tame the Yangtze for at least the last century, while it only marks the beginning of an intense period of developing the Yangtze River as well as China's overall waterpower. The 2,308-km-long Jinsha Jiang (金沙江), part of the upstream section of the Yangtze, has around 30 hydroelectric dams planned on it.

This extremely brief review of the modernisation of the Yangtze River serves two purposes. Firstly, it demonstrates that damming the river has been part of a strategic plan of modern China since the 1920s and is not a 'sudden' decision enacted only by the CCP. Secondly, an

extended reading is that China's history was not 'broken' in 1949, nor is it 'erased' by the current landscape transformation. The present period is one chapter of China's history, which is constantly evolving.

Meanwhile, China has been trying to adjust and to establish a new identity, which has not been an easy task given the turbulence in the last two centuries due to constant foreign invasion, civil wars, political struggles and economic reform. As the leaders and their ideologies kept on changing while external and internal crises kept happening, new national icons are needed to help consolidate and unify the diverse regions under one leadership and one ideology. Photography was introduced to China in the 1840s after Western invasion. Its domestic usage and development have been entirely tied in with China's modernisation. Between the 1840s and the 1940s, photography underwent major development in China in many areas such as photojournalism and art photography (Gu, 2012). However, throughout my research, I have not found substantial cases on the Yangtze River. It is possible that the wars attracted the media and the country's attention while the nation was united by its common task of self-defence. Nevertheless, it is safe to conclude that there was no such national icon as Yangtze The Mother River in this period.

The 'golden age' of Yangtze photography began after the PRC was founded in 1949. Media became a totally state-controlled tool to disseminate the CCP's ideology to every corner of society. In this context, the Yangtze River became a central part of China's vision of a united and modernising country. Chairman Mao Zedong (毛泽东, 1893–1976) himself paid attention to the river. Between the 1950s and 1960s, Mao swam in the Yangtze 17 times to demonstrate his personal fitness and power over the river. And this was not just any river. It was the Yangtze, the greatest natural power in China. While secretly borrowing the founding myth of China, which crowns the person as king if he can control the river, Mao was also

extending a personal statement to a more general one: *man must conquer nature*.<sup>13</sup> In 1956, he composed his famous poem *Swimming*:

***Swimming***

—to the tune of *Shui Diao Ge Tou*

June 1956

*I have just drunk the waters of Changsha  
And come to eat the fish of Wuchang.  
Now I am swimming across the great Yangtze,  
Looking afar to the open sky of Chu.  
Let the wind blow and waves beat,  
Better far than idly strolling in a courtyard.  
Today I am at ease.  
It was by a stream that the Master said—  
'Thus do things flow away!'*

*Sails move with the wind.  
Tortoise and Snake are still.  
Great plans are afoot:  
A bridge will fly to span the north and south,  
Turning a deep chasm into a thoroughfare;  
Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west  
To hold back Wushan's clouds and rain  
Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.  
The mountain goddess if she is still there  
Will marvel at a world so changed.*

( *Mao Zedong Poems*, first published by China Foreign Language Press in 1976 )

Mao begins the poem by describing his delight when enjoying the Yangtze River in various cities. He then extends the present moment to ancient Chinese civilisation by describing the sky as of Chu (楚), a kingdom in this region between 1,000 and 300 years BC. In the second paragraph, he introduces a vision of a new China: a bridge that will link the northern and southern bank of the Yangtze River, and 'a smooth lake', a dam in the Three Gorges. He finishes the poem by indicating that even the mountain goddess (by extension, nature and historical China) will be impressed by the modern changes. In this poem, the Yangtze River is clearly a symbol for political conquest and a central target for China's modernisation. While reports and photos of Mao swimming were published in all Chinese main media, his poem was



also compulsory for all CCP members to read, digest and disseminate into the wider public. It was also selected to be part of the Chinese national curriculum and taught to every pupils and students (including myself).

Mao did not have to wait long before some of his visions came true. In 1957, Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge, the first ever bridge on the Yangtze, was completed with the help of Soviet Union engineers. In 1968, Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge was completed. This project had particular importance because it was the first Yangtze Bridge built entirely with China's own engineers. It was widely reported and celebrated as a symbol for China's ability to achieve modernisation independently. Nature instead of foreign invasions became an important target to conquer. Photographs of the Yangtze bridges were made into postcards, stamps and calendars and also printed on household goods, such as mirrors, cups, handkerchiefs and children books. These bridges, together with the new cities and industries, became a new type of *Jing* on the Yangtze River: the icons that represent a modern China with its industrialisation and urbanisation. Tourists, journalists and photographers have pursued these established *Jing* endlessly and have sufficiently enlarged the pool of iconic views of the Yangtze.



Ref 4 Images of Mao Zedong swimming in the Yangtze River in 1966. Published on the cover and contents page of *Aviation Knowledge* magazine. Source: <http://book.kongfz.com/8436/188529661/>, accessed on 02 April 2014.



Ref 5 'The great victory of Chairman Mao's proletarian revolutionary line – The victorious completion of the Nanjing Yangtze Bridge'. Published in 1970 by the Revolutionary Group of the Shanghai Publication System Publishers. 53.5\*77 cm. Image source: <http://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1970-002.php>, accessed on 14 December 2016.

As the modern landmarks were constructed, natural landscapes of the Yangtze also began to receive renewed enthusiasm from professional photographers who were sent out by the state-owned press to document the landscape and people of the new China. Many took the opportunity to develop landscape photography with the ideology of the new era. Among them, (薛子江, 1910–1962) is a good case study.

In 1957, as a photojournalist working for Xinhua News Agency (新华社, the official press agency of the People's Republic of China), Xue was sent to photograph the Three Gorges. The

resulting image of Wu Gorge, titled *To Jiangling by Nightfall is Three Hundred Miles* (千里江陵一日还), became one of the top ten masterpieces in the history of Chinese photography before the Cultural Revolution, alongside pictures such as *State Founding Ceremony* (开国大典), 1949 and *Joyful Celebrations during a Festival in Lhasa* (拉萨节日的快乐), 1958.<sup>14</sup> The long title of the image is from the poem *Through the Yangtze Gorges* by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai quoted previously in this chapter (41). This image is successful on several levels. Firstly, it depicts a landscape of layers of steep mountains and a shiny river, which meets the Chinese cultural memories and imaginations of this iconic location. Secondly, by naming it with a phrase from Li Bai's poem, Xue stayed loyal to the long tradition of combining poetry and Shanshui together while emphasising the historical and poetic quality of the image. The gradual tonal ranges of the black-and-white image echo the black ink washes so typically applied in Shanshui painting. Thirdly and crucially, although the mountains appear grand and perhaps difficult to penetrate, two modern ships (instead of traditional Chinese sailing boats) are heading towards the glowing future led by the river. The realism of photography plays an important role in convincing its readers; that Xue's work is a photographic image, instead of a painting, is more convincing as a 'transparent window' to the real landscape.



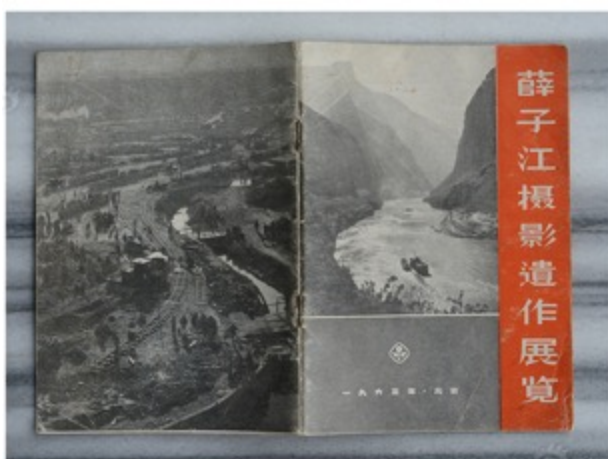
Ref 6 Xue Zijiang (薛子江), *To Jiangling by Nightfall is Three Hundred Miles* (千里江陵一日还), April 1957. Image downloaded from <http://en.threeshadows.cn/> on 11 February 2016.

*To Jiangling by Nightfall is Three Hundred Miles* received great success and helped to establish Xue Zijiang's leading position within the field of Chinese landscape photography in this new era. In 1957, Xue exhibited the image in the First China National Art Exhibition in December. In 1958, Xue published *A Manual for Landscape Photography* (怎样拍摄风景), the first of its kind in China, with Shanghai People's Fine Art Press. After nine reprints, over 550,000 copies

were printed while the most recent reprint was in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, large-scale state-organised exhibitions of his work were staged constantly in the 1950s and 1960s. His work continued to be promoted after the Cultural Revolution. In 1983, his monograph *Xue Zijiang Photographs* (薛子江作品集) was published. Apart from being a well-published staff photojournalist and author, he was also on the committee of several national-level photography organisations, such as Chinese Photography Association, *Chinese Photography Magazine* and China National Art Exhibition. He has had a direct or indirect influence on at least two generations of Chinese photographers.



Ref 7 The covers for two reprints of Xue Zijiang's *Manual for Landscape Photography*. Both images are typical *Jing*, acknowledging the influence of Chinese landscape traditions, and both were of the Yangtze River. Image source: <http://photo.sina.com.cn/zl/oldphotos/2014-11-13/1326385.shtml>, accessed on 13 November 2015.



Ref 8 The catalogue for Xue Zijiang's Posthumous Exhibition in 1963. The front image is *Downstream to Jiangling*, and the back image is of the construction site for the Shisanling Reservoir (十三陵水库) near Beijing. Both were award-winning pictures. Image source: <http://photo.sina.com.cn/zl/oldphotos/2014-11-13/1326385.shtml>, accessed on 13 November 2015.

Yangtze landscapes were only part of Xue Zijiang's oeuvre. As a staff photographer, he also documented many other socialist events and construction activities. For example, his other

award-winning photograph *Morning on the Construction Site* (工地之晨) was taken at the Shisanling Reservoir (十三陵水库) construction site near Beijing in 1958. The beauty and harmony found in the photograph's composition, lighting and tone ranges were probably difficult to see in the real construction sites. Yet again, with photography's deceptive claim as an 'objective document', they were taken to be equal to the physical site. The juxtaposition of the two images in the catalogue demonstrates clearly the context of Xue Zijiang's work and how it functioned. The idealisation of China's natural landscapes and the celebration of industrial landscapes went side by side. Meanwhile, the 'naturalness' of such landscape representations helped to naturalise the industrialisation of nature, which was an important part of China's modernisation.

Xue's photographs can be compared with Carleton Watkins' work in the American West in the nineteenth century, but with an extra Chinese 'flavour' that stresses the importance of historical continuation. The photographs reinforce their audience's belief in a (mythic) harmony between nature and culture while simultaneously representing nature in a way that encourages the audience to see it as a resource to be potentially exploited and developed (Snyder, 1994).<sup>16</sup> In this way, the Yangtze becomes the Mother River within an inherent contradiction: a river that is celebrated particularly for its history and landscapes will have to sacrifice precisely such qualities for China's modernisation.

Xue Zijiang was just one of a generation of Chinese photographers who idealised the Yangtze (or, to be precise, the Three Gorges) landscapes within the context of China's modernisation. Many other photographers, such as the Wushan-born photographer She Daike (佘代科, b.1945), also produced extensive bodies of work, again keeping loyal to the traditional *Jing* while celebrating the new modern icons at the same time. The popularity of these photographers demonstrates that a realistic representation of the physical world was and



continues to be formally accepted as a landscape art form equal to Shanshui paintings.

Meanwhile, photographers' such as Xue Zijiang's and She Daike's, celebration of the traditional and modern Yangtze landscapes always extends to the celebration of China's modernising construction.



Ref 9 She Daike (余代科), *A Song of Fishing in the Three Gorges* (三峡渔歌), 1979. Courtesy of the artist.



Ref 10 She Daike (余代科), *Xiling Gorge in Snow* (西陵雪景), 1986. Image downloaded from [www.photosanxia.com](http://www.photosanxia.com), accessed on 11 November 2013.



Ref 11 She Daike (余代科), *The Celebrating Monument on Zhongbao Island (中堡岛上的丰碑)*, 1992. The monument is made using the foundation rock for the Three Gorges Dam. Image downloaded from [www.photosanxia.com](http://www.photosanxia.com), accessed on 11 November 2013.

In 1976, another important event on the Yangtze River happened. After searching for thousands of years, the Chinese finally discovered the furthest source of the Yangtze River at Jianggudiru Glacier, at the southwest face of Mount Geladandong on the border between Qinghai Province and the Tibetan Autonomous District.<sup>17</sup> This discovery was not only geological, but also political. Powered with the authority of modern science, the fact that the entire Yangtze flows through all the diverse regions including Tibet becomes evidence to support the claim that all these regions are ‘naturally’ united. Meanwhile, the river source, as a glacier from a snow-capped mountain, is extremely ‘fitting’ for its symbolic status: the beginning of Chinese civilisation, the home of the homeland. This homeland combines antiquity, purity and grandeur into one body. Now proven to be the third-longest river in the world and the longest in Asia, the Yangtze’s length also gives the Chinese a sense of national pride.

Chinese media quickly recognised the significance of the newly mapped Yangtze River. From April 1977, *People’s Pictorial* (人民画报) started a series introducing the entire Yangtze River



to Chinese and international audiences for the first time. In the first article, they published precise river measurements acquired by scientific means such as satellite images alongside rare images taken at the river source.



Ref 12 Ru Suichu (茹遂初) *Source of the Yangtze River*(长江源). Taken on 25th August 1976 when the photographer accompanied a geological trip to find the Yangtze source. This picture was published as the opening image for *People's Pictorial's* Yangtze series. Image downloaded from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2010-07/14/c\\_12330952\\_7.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2010-07/14/c_12330952_7.htm) on 16 February 2016.

The photographer Ru Suichu (茹遂初, b.1932) recalls the occasion:

*The second day was completely cloudy, so I had to spend my time getting used to the place and choosing an ideal, high position for a panoramic view. On the third day (25<sup>th</sup> August), I was thrilled to have a beautiful sunny day without any clouds. Mt. Geladandong and Jianggudiru Glacier appeared with extra beauty and power against the backdrop of the blue sky. I spent two hours climbing to the position. Looking down, the snow mountain, glacier and the braided streams from the glacier formed a perfect view.<sup>18</sup>*

(Ru, 2006: 120)

It is clear that such a landscape was consciously planned and constructed to fit with the location's cultural significance. Images of such 'pristine' and ancient landscapes therefore joined the pool of idealised images of the Yangtze River. By the 1980s, mainstream photography, established with the contribution from photographers like Xue Zijiang and Ru Suichu, had spread to television, films and amateur photography.



Ref 13 Design on the back of ¥5 note. Scanned image.



Ref 14 Design on the back of ¥10 note. Scanned image.

Having gone back over the relatively recent history in the previous sections, we are now entering the era of the TV documentary *Discovering the Long River*. It was a pivotal time for contemporary China. The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with Mao Zedong's death, which was also the year I was born. In 1978, the Reform and Opening Up policy began, taking China into the current phase of modernisation. It was a passionate and vibrant period when the tradition of revolutions and patriotism established in the previous 150 years was still strong. People still idolised their Motherland. They took pride in it and wanted to make it better. Meanwhile, the desire to go forward, to leave the failed social and political experiments behind, was sweeping the country. *Discovering the Long River* began a new wave of focusing

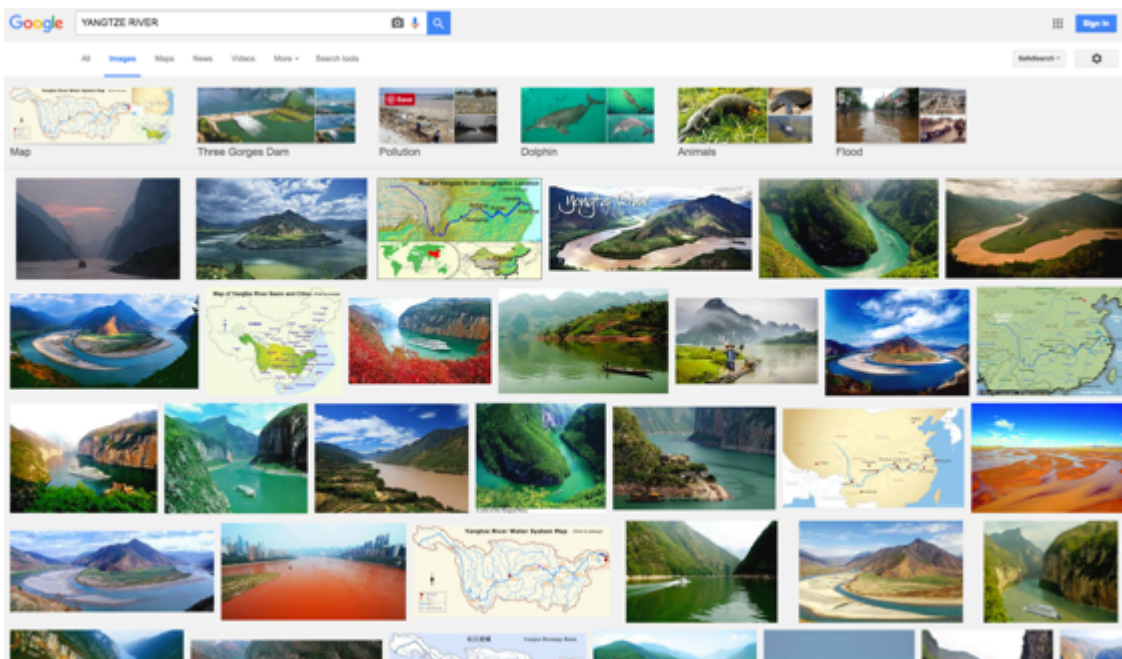
on the Yangtze as a symbol for a united China ready to go forward. That the focus was on a natural waterway with historical significance also helped to divert the discontent towards the CPC at the time to something more 'innocent' – a river. The enthusiasm for the Yangtze continued after the documentary. In 1986, in order to beat the Americans who were about to raft down the Yangtze, three Chinese river-rafting teams 'conquered' the river, although it came at the cost of ten lives. The hot-blooded but seriously inexperienced rafters all became national heroes while we watched their struggles on the television. This time, the river was still powerful but manageable, even with great difficulties. By now, the Yangtze had been iconised for the general Chinese public, not just the literati – it was our Mother River to be conquered. In the 1980s, a Wu Gorge image was printed on the fourth set of Chinese currency, iconising its landscape and introducing it to everyone's hand. This was an important step in iconising the Three Gorges landscape in the whole nation. No natural features were printed on Chinese currency before the 1980s.

In 1992, the decision to construct the Three Gorges Dam was made by the Chinese government. Although a long-awaited result and a seemingly inevitable step for China's modernisation with huge benefits in many aspects, it still came as a shock and with many controversies. But within the mainstream media, the dam was promoted as another triumph of human development over nature. Celebratory images of the project began to saturate the media, and the dam itself became a popular tourist destination. Another *Jing* was made.

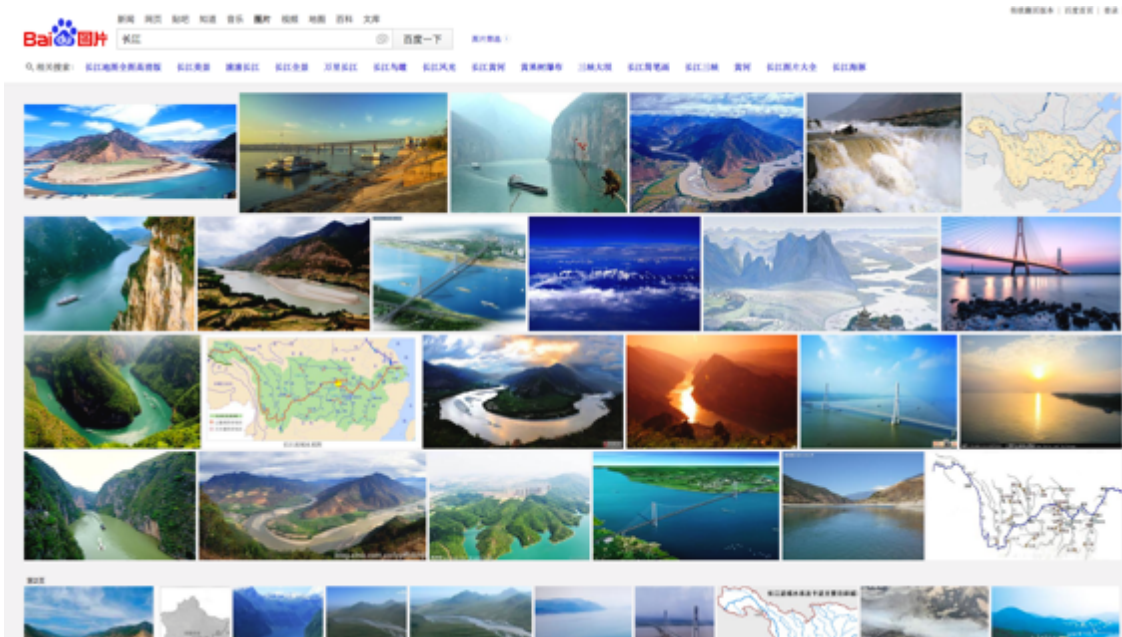
Interestingly, in 1999, after the Three Gorges Dam construction began, the fifth set of Chinese currency was introduced, again with an image of the Three Gorges, this time Qutang Gorge. The damming of the river does not seem to damage its idealised image. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the idealisation of the Yangtze River landscapes at the various iconic places continues to dominate the mainstream landscape representation of the river. But the



pool of such locations now incorporates both traditional *Jing*, such as Yangtze in the snow, and modern features, such as the bridges, cities and the dams. Meanwhile, some new sites and views have been brought in from the ‘borderlands’. The most important two are the source of the Yangtze River and the Great Bend where the river decides to turn east towards mainland China. Together, they form a contemporary, mythic Yangtze the Mother River of China.



Ref 15 A screen shot showing the results when searching for the term ‘Yangtze River’ in Google, accessed on 26 October 2016.



Ref 16 A screen shot showing the results when search for ‘长江’ (The Long River) in the Chinese online search engine Baidu, accessed on 26 October 2016. The two search results are very similar, containing mostly images of the Great Bend and the Three Gorges. The Chinese results also have some bridges (the first one is the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge).

## Chapter conclusion

This chapter begins with the lyrics from *Song of the Yangtze River*, the theme song of the 1983 CCTV documentary *Discovering the Long River*. By briefly reviewing aspects of the Yangtze River geology, geography, human history and modern development, it discovers that the Yangtze River as perceived in *Song of the Long River* is an idealised river with iconic landscapes and its metaphor as a life-giving Mother. Meanwhile, with its newly mapped source, the river is used as evidence for China's political unification of diverse regions since the river 'connects them all'. Furthermore, the river's flow, traditionally perceived as 'endless' and 'eternal', is now portrayed as a flow forward while taking China with it. The Yangtze River, with its idealised landscape images and its naturalising effect towards China's political unification and modernising ideology, becomes the mythic Mother River. Yangtze The Mother River is a myth naturalising China's ideology of modernisation.

The chapter then reviews the Yangtze imagery in traditional and modern China, with the intention to find out what kind of imagery contributes to the making of the mythic Mother River. It reaches a conclusion that idealised images at iconic sites and of iconic views, in both traditional and modern forms, have become the mainstream image pools that represent the Mother River. This suggests that one way to provide a potentially different image from the mythic Mother River could be to photograph the non-iconic views and sites with a non-idealistic aesthetic. But how this is to be done, with what implications, will have to be found out through the practice of this research.

Given the prevailing presence of the myth, and the fact that I never lived by the Yangtze River before the beginning of this PhD, I faced two initial challenges as an image-maker and a researcher: one was to somehow penetrate the mythical front of the Mother River imagery that was inscribed in my consciousness from the age of seven, and the other was to find a

photographic method that could challenge the mythic Mother River landscape from a new angle that has not been fully explored by other photographers.

In chapters II and III, I will contextualise my practice within existing photographic practices that critically investigate or subvert myths that are comparable to the Mother River myth. In chapters IV and V, I will review and evaluate my own research processes and findings in this search for unveiling and challenging the mythic Mother River.

## Chapter II

### Mapping and the Topographic Landscape – My Artistic Lineage

In chapter I, I argued that Yangtze The Mother River is a myth and analysed how natural, historical, cultural and ideological factors contributed to form such a myth. Through investigating the historical and modern imagery of the Yangtze River, I concluded that highly aestheticised landscape photographs of certain iconic sites have become the visual representation of the mythical Mother River. I proposed that a photographic approach critically addressing such aestheticisation and subverting the naturalised hierarchies between places or sites could be one way to challenge the myth of Yangtze The Mother River.

In this chapter, I will trace my artistic lineage by reviewing the photographic projects that have significantly influenced my understanding of how photography can challenge myths. My primary interest lies in the genre of landscape photography. The photographic representation of Yangtze The Mother River is mostly landscape. Meanwhile, landscape imagery reflects our consideration towards the relationship between humans and our environment. This is one of the most fundamental relationships that we are constantly addressing. It is also an important aspect within a dominant ideology, such as China's industrialisation.

Rather than considering the genre of landscape photography as a whole, I will concentrate on 'mapping' photography that prioritises the description of topography over the aestheticisation of a given scene. There are various reasons for this preference. Born in a family of medical doctors, I was a keen naturalist from an early age and wanted to be a biologist. In 1994, I enrolled at Fudan University to study Clinical Medicine. Upon graduation, I became an anaesthetist working in a large hospital in Shanghai. This personal history firmly

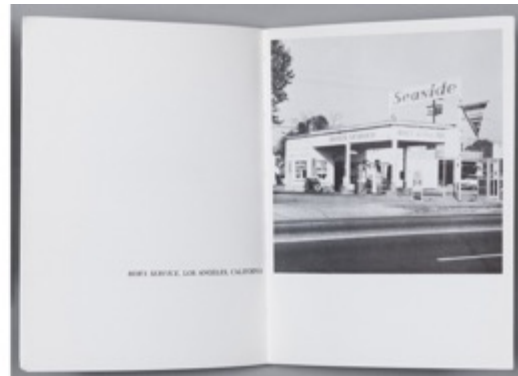
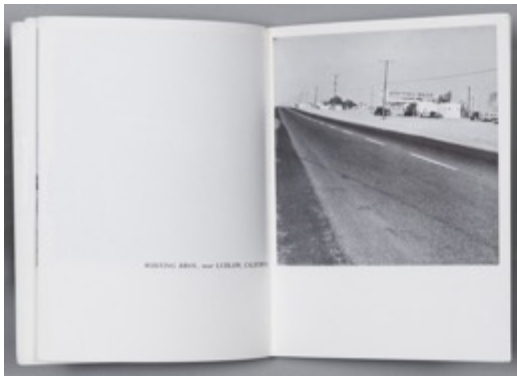
established my belief that true knowledge can come from the objective world, from scientific experiments and empirical experiences.

Through the works of Ed Ruscha, the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscape*, Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld, Jem Southam, and others, I find that in relation to science, 'mapping' photography and topographic landscapes share similar interest and authority in the objective world and in the desire to control personal prejudices. With particular aesthetics, content and context, the work of the abovementioned artists can powerfully subvert myths such as the American West or the English countryside. Such myths are comparable to Yangtze The Mother River in their pervasive existence on a national level, and their relevance to deep-seated sociopolitical contexts and ideologies. It is for this reason that I have drawn such practices into my artistic lineage. These are the works that form the most direct context for my own work.

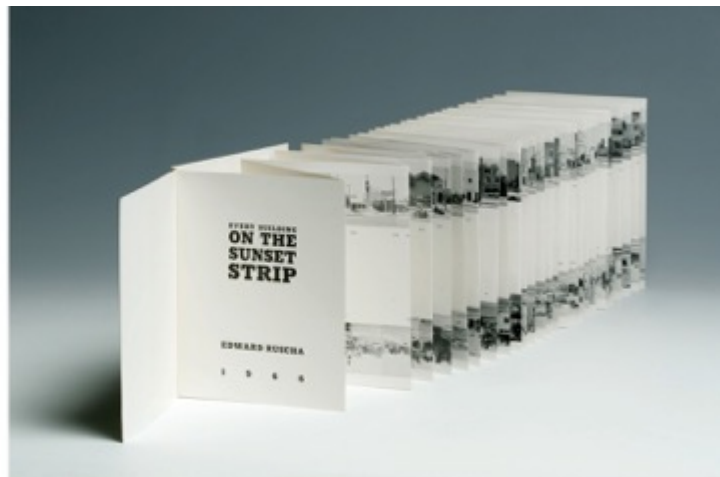


## Part I: The protocol

### I. Ed Ruscha (b. 1937)



Ref 17 Ed Ruscha *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) (5 1/4' x 7') page spreads. Image downloaded from <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/transforming-artist-books/summaries/edward-ruscha-twentysix-gasoline-stations-1963>, accessed on 01 November 2016.



Ref 18 Ed Ruscha *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) (case size: 18.5 x 14.7 x 1.5 cm). Book cover and photograph. Downloaded from <http://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com> on 1 November 2016.

The American artist Ed Ruscha's two early works, *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), function as a protocol for my consideration towards how a mapping method and the 'anti-art' portrayal of vernacular landscapes can be used to challenge certain myths. For *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha photographed 26 petrol stations on the legendary US Route 66 between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City with the style of the snapshot. For *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, he photographed the two sides of the entire street with a 35-mm camera mounted on a slow-moving automobile and collaged the photos together to present the whole street in two single strips (Tate, 2013).<sup>19</sup> The

photographs were presented in the form of artists' books. But contrary to the conventional artists' books which are often seen as collectable, unique and limited, Ruscha's small books were printed on cheap paper, unsigned and issued in large quantities.

Ruscha was operating in the context of the conceptual art movement in the 1960s in which artists challenged established notions of commercialised and institutionalised art. Artists' ideas, thoughts and processes of making the work were given priority over finished objects and materials. Unconventional aesthetics, such as the vernacular, the snapshot and the popular, were experimented with (Osborne, 2002). Ruscha's books can be understood in this context as an antithesis towards the established idea of artists' books. The style of snapshots used in *26 Gasoline Stations* and the non-selective machine-eye in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* can be seen as attempts to provide an artistic vision that is anti-aesthetics and anti-artistic genius.

Ruscha's black-and-white snapshots are often described as deadpan – an emotionless and styleless representation. Vinegar (2010) associates deadpan with Heidegger's phenomenology theory of being-in-the-world. According to Heidegger, the expressionless is also an expression, which stands for an artist's acceptance of the world as how it is. This is agreeable. But when placing Ruscha's work in the context of landscape photography and in this research, I can read his work on several different levels.

If deadpan is seen as 'emotionless' and 'styleless', then what is 'emotional' and 'stylish'? In landscape paintings and photography, many established aesthetic conventions have been established with the ability to provide emotional effects and aesthetic enjoyment.<sup>20</sup> Ruscha's gasoline station pictures can be seen as landscape photographs, since they are 'vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have effected on the natural world'

(Wells, 2013: 2). It is just that the highway environment has been transformed to such a degree that it is difficult to see 'nature' there. Or they could simply stay as 'snapshots' – results from a type of unconsidered, casual image grab. Either way, in the 1960s, the aesthetic of these pictures was not routinely associated with the idea of art. Aesthetic is an attitude, a reflection on a given topic (Tuan, 1995). By using the snapshot aesthetic, the artwork's meaning and the artist's attitude can be difficult to grasp at the time. Such difficulty can provide an opportunity for the viewers to engage with the artwork. Instead of finding familiar answers that come with familiar aesthetics, the viewers have to search harder to find an answer.

Ruscha's choice of subject matter, the gasoline stations on the US Route 66, is decisive in providing a vernacular image of the iconic Mother Road of America. Built in the 1920s as one of the oldest national highways, Route 66 witnessed the development of modernity in America, its migrations, dreams and road trips. Already a legend in popular culture in the 1960s, Route 66 can be seen as part of America's national identity with its history, historical sites and iconic images. Ruscha ignored all these elements and only photographed the gasoline stations, reducing the route to a set of banal views. This is a process of subverting existing hierarchies – the subjects commonly seen as less important are given the artistic priority here. In this way, seeing and photographing the gasoline stations can be viewed as an act of acceptance – to accept the banal as part of the *idea* and *artistic representation* of the US Route 66. To a practising artist like me, how to acquire this penetrative way of seeing becomes important.

Ruscha's all-inclusive shooting method in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* also subverts existing hierarchies – this time it includes the artist's own choice and preference. To borrow Heidegger's idea about an individual's historicity, our understanding of the world is always

influenced by our personal history, background and circumstance (Moran, 1999). To photograph *every* building is one way to limit an artist's own historicity. The word 'every' implies an equality between the photographic subjects. This equalisation has radical implications: the iconic and the vernacular, the photogenic and the banal are all treated in the same way. Hierarchies contain values and reflect ideologies; to subvert hierarchy therefore has the potential to challenge such values and ideologies.

The elimination of an artist's personal prejudices brings out the notion of objectivity, which, in the field of landscape photography, could be understood as an artist's desire to reveal no personal opinions or judgements. It could also be understood as a pictorial style of pure description or documentation – the topographic landscapes. It is fair to say that Ruscha was not really interested in the gasoline stations, nor did he engage with landscape photography as a genre. He was more interested in exploring an artistic language that was anti-aesthetic and anti-art. It was the *New Topographics – Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition a decade later that formally embraced the topographic as an aesthetic for contemporary critical landscape photography.

## **II. The *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition (1975)**

*There is something paradoxical in the way that documentary photographs interact with our notions of reality. To function as documents at all they must first persuade us that they describe their subject accurately and objectively; in fact, their initial task is to convince their audience that they are truly documents, that the photographer has fully exercised his powers of observation and description and has set aside his imaginations and prejudices. The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstraction; their information is selective and incomplete.*

*Lewis Baltz (1975: 6)*

Admittedly, the influence that I have received from the infamous 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* at George Eastman House is an indirect one. The majority of photographers attracting my attention since my formal

photography education began in 2005 are a generation after the show and who produce large-format colour works. But all of their work can be somehow traced back to *New Topographics* – whether it is their environmental concern, their topology approach, or their apparent objective gaze. The show has been interpreted by many researchers and critics. In particular, two recent publications, one by Salvesen and Nordstrom (2009) and another edited by Foster-Rice and Rohrbach (2013), have comprehensively reviewed the exhibition's background, context, contradictions, impacts and influences. Within the context of my research, I would like to consider two fundamental issues that the *New Topographics* exhibition helps to raise. The first one is the term *mapping* as an analogy to describe a particular group of photographic practice. The second one is the photographer's relationship with environmentalism.

'Mapping' and 'maps' are often associated with the *New Topographics* exhibition and the subsequent works relating to it. The exhibition's curator, William Jenkins (1975: 6), states clearly the connection between the word *topography* and 'the making of maps or with land as described by maps'. But he quickly clarifies what *topography* meant in the context of the exhibition as 'the detailed and accurate description of a particular place, city, town, district, state, parish or tract of land' (ibid.). When discussing the deadpan, a style with much resonance in the *New Topographics* work, Cotton (2014: 81) also states that 'the emphasis, then, is on photography as a way of seeing beyond the limitation of individual perspective, a way of mapping the extent of the forces'. Meanwhile, Rohrbach (2013: XIV) considers both the style of the *New Topographics* photographs and their installation: 'with their deadpan style of directness and emotional remove, their attentiveness to humanity's shaping of the land and their presentations in grips, groups and systems, the *New Topographics* gains its authority with the accepted aesthetics of maps and mapping'.

Denis Cosgrove (1999, Kindle book location 90) defines 'mapping' as 'acts of visualizing, conceptualizing, recording, representing and creating space graphically' and conventional understanding of maps as 'an objective scientific representation of the earth's surface or a delimited territory upon it'. Such definitions are amazingly close to what the *New Topographics* photographs appear to be. Perhaps this forms some of the groundwork for the analogy between such photography and mapping. However, Cosgrove is quick to point out that 'the measure of mapping is not restricted to the mathematical; it may equally be spiritual, political or moral...maps are thus intensely familiar, naturalized, but not natural, objects' (ibid.). He (1999, Kindle book location 127) then states that the 'social authority acquired [by mapping and maps] within modern culture through mapping's historical naturalization' has been the target of much critical investigation by cultural geographers and artists. Indeed, as discussed by Salvesen (2009) and Curnow (1999), since the 1960s, artists such as Robert Smithson, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton have all engaged in the critical interrogation of various aspects of conventional mapping and maps such as the representation of space and experiences as well as the ideologies behind them.

Clearly, the *New Topographics* exhibition does not engage with mapping and maps in such a way. It is the conventional ideas associated with mapping that are used as an analogy for the photographs' aesthetic and approaches. With some variety, the statements from Jenkins, Cotton and Rohrbach share a common understanding in what mapping might mean in works like *New Topographics*. It is a type of work in which priority is given to descriptions over interpretation, to objectivity over subjectivity, and to systems based on scientific instead of aesthetic measurements. While objectivity in mapping and maps are mythic, objectivity in photography is completely constructed. The question here is in what way such objective or mapping photography may be effective in challenging myths.

The long quote from Baltz at the start of the section is very helpful in answering this question. Objectivity is related to the documentary function of photography, which is related to the idea of reality – at least the concrete, physical reality that can be photographed by a camera. Myth, on the other hand, does not exist in reality. A photograph with the power to convince the viewer that ‘the photographed really exists as reality’ therefore has immense potential to form a misalignment between the perceived reality and myth. Arguably, all photographs document. Therefore, Baltz’s ‘documentary photography’ implies a photographic function, as well as a style, an aesthetic and an attitude. For Baltz, documentary photography only describes and does not judge. It is a style of ‘no-style’, or at least a style that does not contend with other established artistic styles. It is a style of ‘democracy’ – it is anonymous, and therefore in theory, anyone can do it. Such anonymity increases the sense of ‘reality’ – it appears to be completely independent from artistic creation and can be photographed by anyone.

One crucial effect of the *New Topographics* exhibition is the subversion of the ‘myths of the American landscapes, in particular, the American West – its expansive emptiness and its potential for renewal’ (Rohrbach, 2013: XXV). Such subversion is achieved not only by the documentary style, but also by the content of the photographs. All photographers in the show focus on man-made subjects, such as tract houses, industrial parks and motels. They often frame them within the backdrop of nature – the mountains, deserts, and skies – therefore inviting a reading in reference to the existing ideas of landscape art and nature. Their work is obviously landscape. However, they completely subverted the traditional idea associated with landscape art, which is expected to be a poetic ‘antithesis’ of land (Cosgrove, 1998). By excluding conventional symbolic, iconic or allegorical contents, their pictures block potential references to the past. They simply present the land – a world that is not pristine. But neither

did they vilify it. Their constructed objective gaze only describes and refuses to give an artist's opinion, leaving the complexity of interpretation to the viewers.

In the quote, Baltz also suggests that objectivity requires the elimination of artistic prejudices. But as an artist attempts not to look at the obvious or the conventional, s/he is also on the journey to discover something new. In this way, rather than a process of closing down, elimination can be a process of opening up. This in turn suggests other potential for mapping. In the common sense, mapping implies a systematic exploration of previously unexplored areas using a predetermined method. This does not, in any way, suggest that mapping is a 'pure' exploration for knowledge. Historically, geological mapping under the impression of scientific research was often heavily influenced by ideological or colonial interests (Ryan, 2013). But in the case of finding previously less-explored subjects, mapping can be used to describe a predetermined, systematic method that can potentially 'force' the photographer to go off the beaten track and to discover new subjects. The 'system' and the 'method' here are crucial as they are constructed by the photographer's critical intention.

In the *New Topographics* exhibition, a predetermined systematic approach is evident in many photographers' work. For example, in Joe Deal's *United States* and Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher's *Topologies*, a strict pictorial method was already in place before the photographs were taken. But it is in later photographers' work, such as Kate Mellor's *Island*, that the method of geological mapping and objective observation were built into the entire process and technical aspects of the project. I will discuss this in the individual case studies within this chapter.

Besides the thoughts on mapping as a photographic method and aesthetic, the *New Topographics* exhibition also acts a catalyst in my consideration towards the relationship



between landscape photography and environmentalism. In other words, what can photography do for the apparent environmental degradation that we now face? *New Topographics* represents the beginning of landscape photography's critical observation of contemporary society, particularly towards environmental and ecological issues that many photographers align their work with (Lee, 2013). However, as discussed by Salvesen (2009: 36), the environmental artists and activists in the 1970s often 'rely on the same idea of the sublime and the frontier cherished by their conservationist predecessors...they fostered nostalgia and inattention to the present'. Since the 1970s, a Green ideology has been gradually developed which questions the fundamental ideology of modern sciences, rational thinking, industrialism and capitalism. Different from an environmental approach seeking to preserve the spiritually or materially valuable for human needs, the Green ideology advocates a 'revolution' to decentre human beings and to fundamentally break up the modern, industrial societies (Yearley, 1992). Perhaps, this is somewhat similar to the ideas of ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi (庄子), who regards the most ideal life as the one in which humans and animals live a similar life in nature.

Zhuang Zi's ideal society may not be possible in real life. Similarly, how the Green ideology can be practically incorporated into modern societies still faces intense debate.<sup>21</sup> The question here for photographers is from what angle are we providing a critical observation of contemporary societies? Are we criticising environmental degradation in the name of preservation? If so, what is the environment degrading from? And what is more worthy of preservation? For what reason? From a Green point of view, there seems to be a contradiction between an environmental claim and the common practice of a globe-trotting photographer who embraces the same modern, capitalist ideology. On the one hand, art makes environmental problems visible. On the other hand, it may result 'in the comforts of cynical

reason – we know what we are doing is wrong, but we do it anyway’ (Szeman and Whiteman, 2009: 555).

Within the context of my research project, the industrialisation of the Yangtze River is creating large-scale and deeply felt impacts on its existing ecology and landscapes. But how should we understand such impacts? This is an important question that a Yangtze River photographer will have to face. To criticise it in the name of the past and the mythic pristine nature? To adopt a position similar to some of the *New Topographics* photographers by providing a description only? (Is it possible to only ‘describe’?) Or to somehow explore the complexities behind the environmental changes? And how might these attitudes and the resulting photographs challenge myths such as the Mother River? The answers to these questions will be explored in the following individual case studies, which review selected photographers’ interrogation of different myths by using a mapping and topographic approach. Following this, chapter III reviews historical and contemporary photographers’ works on the Yangtze River as the sole subject matter. My own exploration will be reviewed in chapters IV and V.

## Part II: Individual case studies

### I. Stephen Shore (b. 1947) *The Uncommon Places*



Ref 19 Stephen Shore 'West Fifteenth Street and Vine Street, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 15, 1974' from *Uncommon Places: Complete Works series*. Image source: <http://www.stephenshore.net/>, accessed on 01 November 2016.

The only colour photograph at the *New Topographics* exhibition was done by Stephen Shore, who produced a body of work *The Uncommon Places* during his nation-wide road trips between 1973 and 1979. The series features mostly vernacular urban scenes such as street corners, roads and motels. Within this series, several factors have been important in my understanding of how the mythic American landscape may be challenged photographically. The first is the idea of the 'casualness of the vision'. For Shore (2004: 177), the 'casualness' here is equivalent to 'naturalness', which I understand as an aesthetic/style that appears to be less formal than the traditional landscape painting aesthetics such as the sublime, but more formal than other photographic styles such as the snapshot. How to achieve this is a complex decision-making process. To use colour instead of black-and-white photography is an initial step because 'we see in colour' (Shore, 2004: 177) and perhaps also because black-and-white

photography at the time was seen as more 'artistic' and therefore less 'casual'. But Shore's application of colour is more than just a switch. He does not seem to have a particular colour palette that resonates with the rich tradition of colour applications established in paintings. As a result, the colours in his frames are diverse and realistic. They are neither unpleasant nor pleasing. They remind us of nothing but the present moment in that image that may have been 'casually' captured.

Shore's shooting style and his subject matter, a 'natural vision' of the vernacular urban landscapes, further contribute to this 'casualness of the vision'. Shore mostly photographed the human-height influx of traffic that he was part of. These are not panoramic or aerial images indicating that the photographer is not part of the scene. They are often slightly off-centre, avoiding a commanding position that could indicate the photographer's authority over the view. They appear 'natural' to a normal person who happens to stand at that spot.

Shore's portrayal of human figures is important in forming a 'casual vision'. Typically, the figures are caught in an unspecific moment. Their body language, gestures and facial expression do not resonate with symbolic gestures often seen in religious or historical paintings. There is also no dramatic movement frozen in 'decisive moments'. Shore (2004) explains that due to the constraints of his equipment, he **had** to find the moments when the pedestrians were relatively still. However, the frequent inclusion of such moments demonstrates Shore's recognition of their importance in the portrayal of 'common' yet 'uncommon' American landscapes. In these pictures, Shore captures the banal America that we pass everyday while being unable to see. They are the most common landscapes that are so uncommon in our perception of 'America'.

Shore's picture planes often arrange the diverse subjects (roads, houses, shops, signs and people) in such a way that each of them is given space and significance to be noticed. Information is contained across the picture plane. But their cultural insignificance is heightened every time another banal object or sign is registered. Shore's use of a large-format plate camera contributes to this effect in different ways. The clear rendering of detailed information across the image plane certainly benefits from the camera's technical advantages (large depth of field and big film size). There is also a certain degree of formality in his composition. For example, the framing appears precise and considered. The content inside the frame seems to have a cohesive relationship and the elements often echo each other. The edge of the frame (for example, a car that is half in and half out) often suggests that there is a much wider world outside of the picture. There is no distortion in his pictures, probably achieved by using the camera movements.

Shore's carefully constructed 'casual vision' can be seen as a development from Ruscha's 'deadpan' aesthetic and the black-and-white landscape of *New Topographics*. Considered yet 'natural', his images bring to light our 'blind spots' – the scenes so familiar that we no longer notice them any more. Yet they prevail in the American urban landscape much more than the few iconic streets or buildings. If the 'casualness' of his vision may initially 'disappoint' the audiences who are looking for the traditional signs of artistic genius, then the consistency, formality and scale of his work can function as a critical 'wake-up' call. Shore's pictures demonstrate the standardisation of urban construction, the all-the-sameness, and the banality of urban America that appears to have no depth beyond its surface.

## **II. Joel Sternfeld (b.1944) *American Prospects***





Ref 20 Joel Sternfeld 'Near Vail, Colorado, October 1980'. Scanned image from *Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects* (Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2012).



Ref 21 Joel Sternfeld 'Domestic Workers Waiting for the Bus, Atlanta, Georgia, April 1983'. Scanned image from *Joel Sternfeld: American Prospects* (Göttingen: Steidl Publishers, 2012).

While Shore concentrates on the impenetrable and repetitive urban vernacular landscapes in postmodern America, his contemporary Joel Sternfeld explores the varied, often-unseen complexities within the rural and suburban landscapes in his project *American Prospects*. Between 1978 and 1986, Sternfeld made a series of road trips covering most of the American states with his eight-by-ten-inch plate camera. His subjects are diverse: leisure, youth, sports, industry, arts, military, environment, science, or simply small communities. Such subjects are intimately entwined with the phenomena of nature: rain, storms, snow, clouds and whirlwinds permeate within the landscapes. The aftermath of natural disasters, such as floods, landslides, volcano eruptions and tornados, can be seen even in the wealthy residential area of California. By placing his subject matters within natural landscapes and nature's powers, Sternfeld directly touches the core of the American myth that celebrates the limitless supply of its natural resources and its pristine wildness that is so pervasively described by photographers such as Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.

Sternfeld's aesthetic helps to evoke distant memories of such natural myths. While borrowing the observational distance applied by the *New Topographics* photographers, he also embraces aspects from Western traditional landscape paintings. In this way, Sternfeld's storytelling strategy is becoming more apparent. Such visual storytelling has roots in Western landscape paintings in which human activities are depicted within a wider landscape. Such a strategy is effective in making the work more accessible because we humans make sense of the world through stories. With existing familiarity with such visual storytelling, the audiences are given some indications of the environment, people and possible events to make up their own stories. Often shooting from a slightly elevated angle, he applies the bird's-eye view established by Dutch painters such as Bruegel the elder, and uses colours more constructively to create a sense of overall harmony (Brougher, 2004). These views place the current human events, depicted in the fore and middle ground of the picture, within a wider context of

nature. Sternfeld's closer relationship to traditional landscape paintings may act as an agent in awakening the audience's cultural associations and memories of ancient myths – the harmony between humans and their (natural) environment. In this way, Sternfeld acknowledges the beauty of American landscape before interrogating the complexity within it.

Sternfeld explores darker issues in many fields by conducting contextual research towards local history, geology and politics (Tucker, 2004). The three aspects in his work – context, image and caption – are considered together. Together, they tell a complicated story of postmodern America. While the context is probably Sternfeld's sociopolitical subject, the image is constructed in such a way that a reader will have to ask questions before setting off to do their own research into the context. One example of this approach is the image *Manville Corporation World Headquarters, Littleton, Colorado, October 1980*. In this oddly composed image, a giant boulder rudely obscures the shiny building behind it, which does not seem to synchronise at all with the apparent wildness surrounding it. Why does the photographer decide to shoot and include such an image, one that might be considered a mistake by other photographers? The slight emotional disturbance and curiosity lead to inspection of the caption. Here, some vital information is provided: the Manville Corporation. Further research then exposes the dark and complicated story behind this strange landscape image: the notorious asbestos case. In this way, the image itself serves only as a reference, a tip of the iceberg. The job of the photographer here is not only to photograph, but also to have sociopolitical sensibility and to carry out extensive contextual research before combining the research insights with a photographic approach. It is no wonder that Francis Hodgson (2003:32) calls Sternfeld 'a collector of every hypopolitical uncanny of American myth'.

Walter Benjamin (1972) states that a photograph of a factory may reveal nothing about the social, political and personal realities that actually constitute the factory. This really is about



the limitation of the photograph's ability in providing precise information. The photograph alone does not have a fixed meaning. Its interpretation is highly mutable according to the viewing context. It appears that Sternfeld recognises the limitation of photographs' indexicality and adds the captions to make them more specific. Compared with Stephen Shore's captions, which serve as a record of time and place, Sternfeld's captions help us to locate the image's political implication.

Different from many of the *New Topographics* photographers who focus solely on the vernacular, Sternfeld includes many iconic landscapes and sites, such as White Sands, Matanuska Glacier, the Great Salt Lake, Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell. But each of their popular, celebrated images is subverted. White Sands is actually 'polluted' by the American military power and its rocket. Matanuska Glacier is now a property estate. The Great Salt Lake is bathed in the typical American sunset light with a lone woman standing next to a picnic table, a bin and many plastic bags. At Glen Canyon Dam, the tourists peer down to the dam with their backs towards the photographer (although a baby in the foreground is staring at the photographer). And somewhere near Lake Powell, a lone basket hoop stands in the dramatic landscape of desert, canyon and a broad sky. These landscapes tell us that the series is unmistakably about America. But this is an America that is not as pure, wild or grand as what we have been led to believe.

In *American Prospects*, Sternfeld represents a country with declining industry, man-made nature, social injustice, ecological disaster, scientific failure and military control. In his photographs, a sense of unease prevails and points to something darker within the American history and society. Sternfeld opens up a research-driven approach towards the landscape. To simply look and describe the surface is not enough. Only so much can be communicated with

photographs alone. It is the knowledge about the history and politics of the landscapes that is important.

There are various reasons why I have so far concentrated on American photographers' work. The American myth has much in common with the Mother River myth in the idealisation of the natural landscapes as well as the naturalised desire to progress and to subsequently 'control' nature. The American landscape has much in common with the Yangtze landscape in their scale, variety and spectacular quality. The complexity of the American myth and how it can be explored photographically has provided important insights in my understanding of the Mother River myth. However, the historical time and respective traditions are different between America and China. While the criticism of Sternfeld's American myth was constructed in a postmodern era when technological development and consumerism were transforming an already industrialised landscape, the Mother River project is located in the height of China's modernisation process when the memory of a traditional life is still fresh and the environmental and ecological concerns are already within the main global political paradigms. Meanwhile, my relationship with the Yangtze landscape is slightly different from the resident American photographers. At the beginning of this research, I had been living away from China. To return was to re-connect, but it was also to experience a potential culture shock, to look at the previously familiar landscape afresh. What this would produce would have to be found out on site.

The choice of aesthetics is an interesting topic. Joe Deal (1975: 7), one of the *New Topographics* photographers, states that the documentary style is a 'perennial aesthetic' of photography. Newhall, among other photo critics and historians, has argued that, originating from the Western survey photography, the documentary landscapes are quintessentially 'American' (Salvesen, 2009). Whether such statements have firm ground is beyond the scope

of this thesis, but for a Chinese photographer, the words ‘American photography’ are thought-provoking. So far, I have not found sufficient writing about or evidence of a tradition of ‘documentary landscape’ in China. What happens when a Chinese photographer chooses the same documentary aesthetic but on a non-American subject with non-American audiences in mind? Where does the Chinese landscape tradition lie within such consideration? And what does it mean to the photographer and to his/her audience? Again these questions were explored as I began to form my own aesthetic decisions on the project.

### III. Jem Southam (b. 1950) *River Winter*



Ref 22 Jem Southam *River Exe* 2010. Image source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment>, accessed on 12 October 2016.

Since photographers such as Shore and Sternfeld started their pioneering application of large-format colour photography in the 1970s, much large-scale descriptive work has been produced. Often associated with the ‘deadpan’, these artists, such as Andreas Gursky, Thomas

Struth and Boomoon, executed their works on a gigantic scale, loaded with extremely rich visual information achieved by large-format photography. Although their images still appear 'emotionless', their scale and hyper-real quality become a source of drama and narrative. They fully embrace the power of description and maximise photography's indexicality as its source of meaning. As Cotton (2014) rightly points out, these works strongly adhere to the belief that objective reality has intrinsic meaning. It appears that all that the photographer needs to do is reveal it to us.

Among these practitioners who utilise large-format photography to supply visual 'knowing', the English photographer Jem Southam has adopted a methodology of photographing selected, mostly local, sites over a long period of time. With an intimate relationship with the sites and local knowledge acquired over time, his work reveals rich details of landscape changes caused by both nature and culture. Between 2010 and 2012, Southam worked on his local River Exe. He describes one of his photographs as below:

*Early on I started using a lens that rendered, even with this system, an exceptional degree of peripheral detail. This led me to pay more forensic attention to the myriad narratives that a view contained. In one photograph, for example, a thin line of ice follows the bank of the river, a large dog has recently made its way onto the soft sand of the bank, the river level has recently receded five or so inches leaving a small 'tide' line of fine twigs, and two light stalks are all that remains visible from the profusion of towering and invasive Himalayan Balsam plants that grew here over the summer, while twisted through the lower hanging branches at various levels are clumps of organic material left from the earlier autumn floods, and on the higher branches of the alder trees that lean over the river hundreds of dark dots that are the remains of last year's fruit.*

(Southam, 2011)<sup>22</sup>

I quote this paragraph in length because it best reflects the possibility for observational landscapes to reveal complexity and to convey knowledge. This quiet river site is simultaneously an inhabited landscape (visited by the dog walkers), a natural landscape with seasonal cycles, and the subject of the man-made ecological disorders as part of the aftermath of Britain's imperial activities in the nineteenth century (reflected in the presence of Himalayan Balsam). Such complexity overrides any mythic reading of the given landscape. In

Southam's case, his long-term subject, the myth of the English countryside, is subtly challenged.

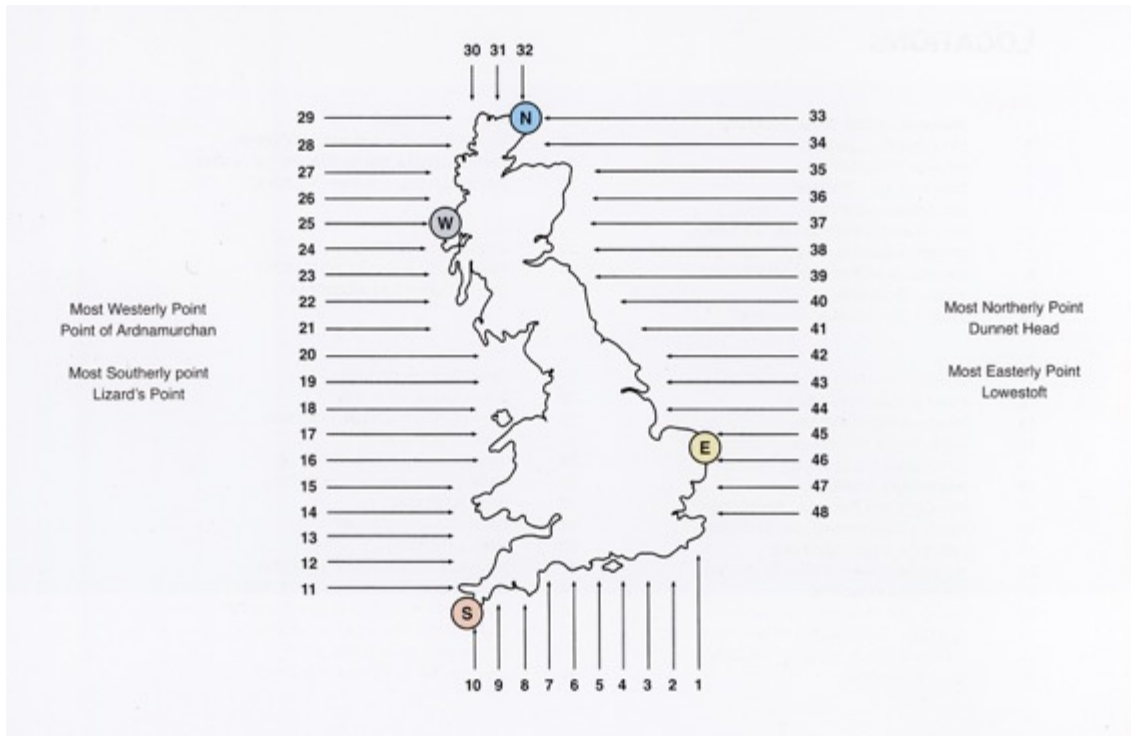
Meanwhile, the aesthetic of Southam's photograph has something more than 'the descriptive'. The slight mist, the gentle green colour of the river, and the earthy colour of the bank and trees provide a subtle sense of pictorial beauty that invite a distant memory of other pictures of rural England, for example John Constable's (1776–1837) *Water Meadows near Salisbury* (1820), or the iconic *Hay Wain* (1821). Similar to Sternfeld, Southam borrows from the tradition of picturing the English landscapes while providing a non-mythic reading. To work in this way, the photographer needs to read and understand the landscapes first – its surface features, marks left by humans, animals, geology and seasons. He or she then needs to decide in what way these details are relevant to the critical intention, for example to subvert the myths associated with rural England. The next step is to decide on the aesthetics. The deadpan or the pictorial? This is down to personal preferences and intentions. Finally, technical aspects are crucial to realise such visions. In all the above cases, including Shore, Sternfeld and Southam, the use of a large-format camera is critically intertwined with the concepts of the work, whether it is a constructed casual vision, a formal painterly view, or a carefully studied, slightly pictorial description. A common strength within them is the 'forensic' details afforded by the large-format camera that provides a factual index crucial to the interpretation of the images and to the subversion of various myths.

In all three photographers' work, there is a careful restraint over the degree of visual beauty based on conventional establishments. The aesthetic conventions of landscape painting, such as the beautiful, the sublime or the picturesque, are not present. The dramatic play of light and shadow, surprising angles, or special effects are excluded. What is left in the picture appears simply to be a 'view' that does not have the touch of an artist's genius or opinions.

What is required from the viewers is a quiet, detailed and cerebral *reading* of all the information contained and interpretation of the contextual information provided by the artist or acquired by the viewers.

It is for all the above reasons that I decided to use a large-format camera with colour film for the potentially difficult Yangtze River expeditions. Although clumsy, a large-format camera's ability to render detail is highly desirable. Meanwhile, its complicated operating system requires a more reflexive and considered way of working. This is suitable with my intention to produce topographic images that are more cerebral than fleeting or emotional.

IV. Kate Mellor (b. 1951), Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957) and Miao Xiaochun (缪晓春 b. 1964) – Mapping and the objective gaze

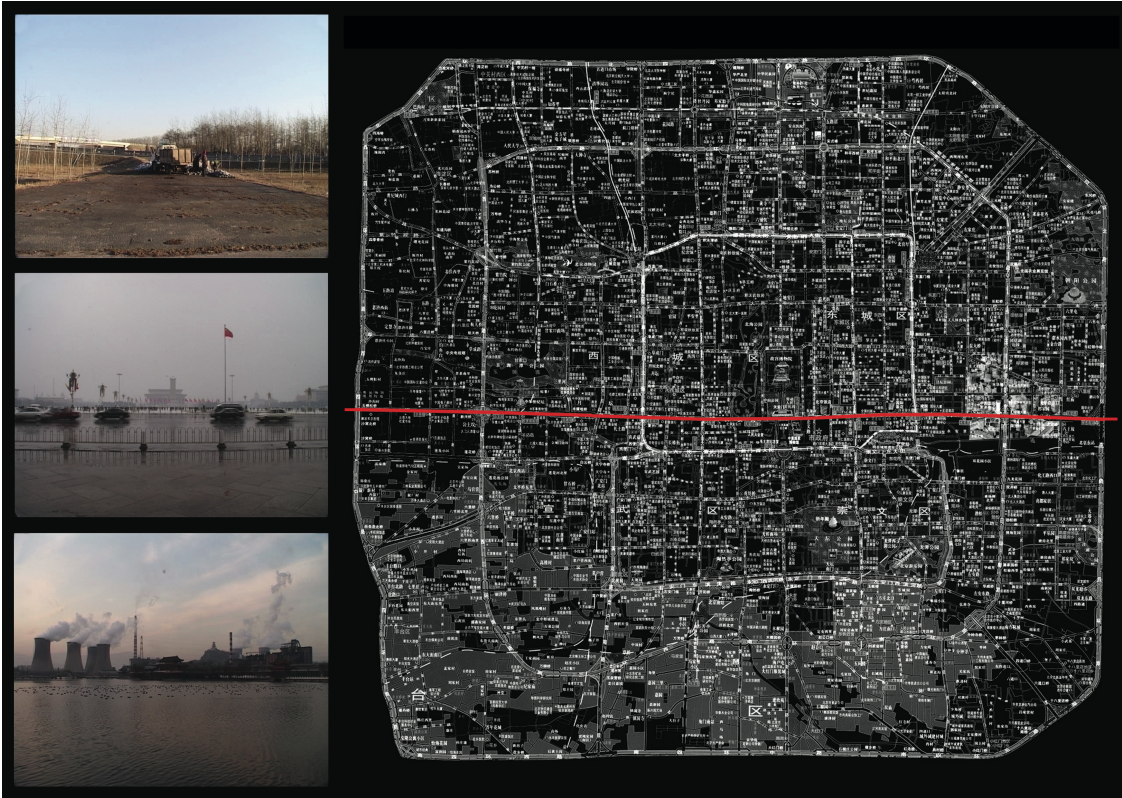


Ref 23 Kate Mellor *Island* shooting plan. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 24 Kate Mellor 'SS445300 Western Ho' from *Island* series. Image courtesy of the artist.





Ref 25 Ai Weiwei(艾未未), *Chang'an Boulevard (长安街)*, 2004. Map and three screen shots.  
Source: [www.magasin3.com](http://www.magasin3.com), accessed on 18 April 2014.



Ref 26 Miao Xiaochun(缪晓春), *Beijing Index - I15 (北京索引-115)*, 2007-2009. Source: [www.photography-now.com](http://www.photography-now.com), accessed on 16 July 2014.



Ref 27 Miao Xiaochun(缪晓春), *Beijing Index (北京索引)*, 2007-2009, installation view. Image source: [www.photography-now.com](http://www.photography-now.com), accessed on 16 July 2014.



Ed Ruscha's all-inclusive method in *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) can be understood as a powerful way to subvert existing hierarchies between subject matters. But what happens when the subject is too large to be photographed in such an inclusive manner, such as the British Isles or Beijing city? The British photographer Kate Mellor and Chinese artists Ai Weiwei and Miao Xiaochun each constructed a mapping method to challenge existing hierarchies in such giant subjects.

In 1989, while the Channel Tunnel was under construction and with the discussion about what British national identity was on the table again, Mellor (1995) set off to photograph the British coastline clockwise at precise intervals of every 50 kilometres. She used a Widelux panoramic camera originally designed for survey work and composed the images with every 50<sup>th</sup> kilometre grid line running in the middle of it. After 48 stops, she returned to her starting point, the port of Dover. All the photographs faced the sea with the horizon running continuously as the central line in all of them.

The coastline forms important aspects of the British identity. As the physical and symbolic border, it shapes and identifies the country. Much of British history unfolds at its coast, where celebrated natural landscapes and historical relics form a portfolio of sites and landscapes worthy of national significance. The horizon, an unreachable line, becomes the ultimate border: the longing for another place and the definition of home meet on this imagined line. By focusing on the coast with the horizon as the constant and lucid landmark, Mellor engaged in a formal exploration of the British national identity with reference to both its physicality and its imagination.

Mellor's mapping method and her photographic strategy overrides the photographer's personal choice of the subject matter to a large degree. There is no Jurassic Coast, Dover Cliffs,

or the Black Cuillin. Instead, a collection of ‘accidental’ landscapes was ‘found’: leisure, industrial, historical and natural. Similar to the gasoline stations on US Route 66, these accidental landscapes are part of the British coastline but not part of the *idea* of the British coastline. In this way, Mellor’s restrictive mapping method becomes a powerful way of exclusion and inclusion. On the one hand, most of the iconic locations are excluded. On the other hand, how can one otherwise so systematically access those vernacular sites that have probably never been associated with the British national identity? Mellor’s choice of camera and image construction signals that she aligns the project within the context of geological and objective landscape imaging. Of course, true objectivity is difficult to achieve. For example, she still had to decide on the weather conditions. Therefore, I do not understand the resulting images as a ‘truthful and objective’ representation of the British coastline. Instead, they are a proposition, an alternative view – the British coastline can also appear to be like Mellor’s images, which are drastically different from the iconic sites or views making up the British identity embedded in its coastal landscapes.

In 2004, Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and his assistants filmed the 45-kilometre Chang’an Boulevard in Beijing at 50-metre intervals with one-minute moving stills at each point, resulting in a ten-hour-and-thirty-teen-minute video titled *Chang’an Boulevard*. First constructed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the iconic street bisects the city horizontally with the Forbidden Palace, Tiananmen Square and the Chinese Parliament lining its side. It is a symbol of the politically unified China, presenting the most ordered and politically powerful cityscapes of the country to its domestic and international visitors. Chang’an Boulevard is the face and heart of China.

Ai Weiwei’s video stills present a Boulevard different from its public image. The short distance between the mapping points generates a wide range of subjects including the

industrial, the vernacular and the iconic. The equal distance between the filming locations represent the equal importance between the otherwise very different subjects. To treat Tiananmen Square and the city-edge landscapes equally is in itself a daring subversion towards China's political structure. Such subversion is further manifested in Ai Weiwei's 'topographical' or 'deadpan' aesthetic: all the stills are shot from human height in an observational tone that appears to be a far cry from the Boulevard's common, celebratory representations.

Scale re-enforces the authority of the work: the final video is over ten hours long. But such length almost becomes an obstacle for viewing: nobody is capable of watching the entire film. For this, Ai Weiwei (2015) gives an ambiguous explanation: 'I don't care if people watch it all the way through. I can't even watch it after I've edited it. I don't make videos for galleries or museums. Not even for people to look at. I make it for the dignity of the work itself.'<sup>23</sup> Considering its subject and presentation, *Chang'an Boulevard* is more like a political statement than a series of stills that demands careful reading by the viewers.

Artist Miao Xiaochun went broader. Between 2007 and 2009, Miao designed an index system in which lines of longitudes and latitudes formed an intense grid placed onto the city map of Beijing. The precise locations of where the lines cross each other were his photographic points. For over 18 months, Miao Xiaochun and his assistants used a roundshot camera by Seltz<sup>24</sup> to produce 360-degree panoramas at each point, resulting in over 600 slightly distorted, long horizontal images.

Photographs in *Beijing Index* show little of Beijing that is commonly known as the capital of China. Very few landmarks are shown. Instead, mundane landscapes, such as the interior of a migrant worker's modest accommodation, a market and a landfill, are dutifully documented.

Urban construction is a common subject in most photographs. These are sights that we see everywhere in Beijing, and in most Chinese cities without obvious distinction. The methodology of 'not choosing' – therefore of being 'objective' – is secured by the mapping of indexed GPS locations, the all-inclusive panorama camera and by the presentation of a grid system on the wall that emphasises the 'equality' between the images.

*Island, Chang'an Boulevard* and *Beijing Index* have much in common. They all choose an iconic subject that has not only regional, but also national significance. They all used a mapping method that emphasised the equality between the different sites while constructing an 'objective' vision. As a result, they strongly signal that the work is *documentary* in essence and is a 'transparent' window to reality. And this notion of 'reality' is their weapon to subvert the various myths. The scale of the projects increases the works' intentionality and authority. In Mellor's case, it speaks about the artist's personal endurance and her relationship with the English coast. For Ai and Miao, scale also speaks for their resourcefulness – they had assistants to complete the colossal tasks. In this way, their work no longer relates to a personal vision. Does this 'personal' vision matter? To the artistic intention of subverting myth, perhaps it does not. But to someone like me who wishes to personally connect and understand the Yangtze landscapes, then it does matter.

A deeper question can be raised here about the emphasis on objectivity in all three artists' works, which also relate to the works of Ruscha and the *New Topographics* photographers. 'The epistemological representation and objectivity are now widely acknowledged to be deeply problematic and vision is provisional and subjects to manipulation' (Cosgrove, 2003: 265). In the current postmodern visual culture, we no longer believe in the absolute authority, or even existence, of objectivity. The criticality of the works in question here lies less in their apparent objectivity and more in the fact that they have provided another possible vision.

**V. Andreas Müller-Pohle (b.1951) *The Danube River Project***



**Ref 28** Andreas Müller-Pohle, *Vienna 1376, 2005* Image source: [www.riverproject.org](http://www.riverproject.org), accessed on 30 October 2015.

While the above mapping photographers' objective gaze shares its authority with modern science, Berlin-based artist Andreas Müller-Pohle goes a step further by literally incorporating scientific means in *The Danube River Project*. As the only river flowing across mainland Europe, the Danube links Western European metropolises with the less developed countries in Eastern Europe. With many well-known sites along its banks, the Danube is regarded as 'an epitome of the idyllic' and one of the greatest icons of Europe (Ziegler, date unknown).<sup>25</sup> In 2005, Müller-Pohle selected 21 significant locations along the entire Danube, including 'historical scenes, large cities, the spectacular views, and some quieter stages', and made nearly 4,000 images using an underwater camera housed in the river.<sup>26</sup>

The resulting images are peculiar and different from the normal Danube photographs. The large foreground areas occupied by water produces ambiguity and invites contemplation over the liquid's instability and fluidity. The cultural landscapes ashore are rendered into something blurry, distant and transient. Many landmarks, such as Vienna, are hardly

recognisable. Aesthetic conventions are thrown out of the window; the water clearly is not aware of them. We are left to ponder how one might see the land from a river's point of view.

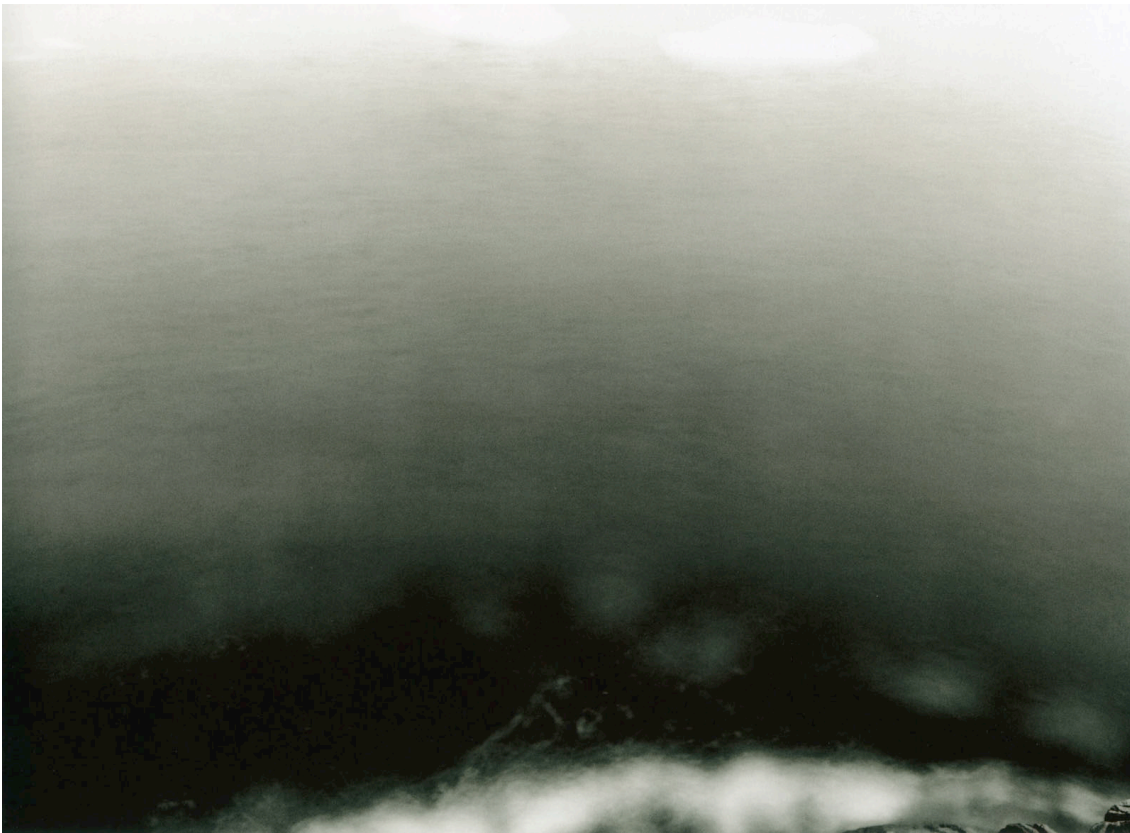
But sight alone is limited. To extend our vision, Müller-Pohle used the tool of science. At some locations, he collected water samples and got them analysed in a scientific lab. The results are staggering. The river is already polluted shortly after its source but is not the most polluted at the mouth. The mercury level is at its highest in Vienna, while the highest nitrate level is recorded at Donauwörth, Germany. Both cities are known for their scenic landscapes. Such figures demonstrate that the clearer water is not necessarily cleaner than brown water, which contradicts our common assumption.<sup>27</sup>

By now, the intention of Müller-Pohle's choice of the 'significant' sites becomes apparent: these are the sites that represent the iconic Danube. Their landscape images play a major part in forming and supporting its myth as an idyllic river. By presenting images attributed to these sites, but showing nothing of their familiar landscapes, Müller-Pohle is deliberately provoking a misalignment between public memories and the 'objective' images seen by a machine's eye. Such images and the laboratory figures present another face of the Danube that is hard to argue against. They directly 'attack' the river's idyllic myth.

The *Danube River* project has several important indications. The first is the potential limits of sight. Some aspects of the landscape have powerful potential to subvert established (mythic) ideas about them, yet the eye cannot see them. For photographers such as Sternfeld and Southam, contextual research and local knowledge can provide extra information about the seen landscape. For Müller-Pohle, scientific analysis serves this goal of extending our vision. The second indication is the effect of seeing the landscape from another angle – an angle with a distance or from another substitute. The waterproof camera can be understood as an

'objective' eye – a symbolic human eye which views the landscapes at shore without any prejudices. The result of such vision can produce unpredictable results with surprising effects. Would such approaches be worth exploring on the Yangtze River? It was only after my first field trip to the Yangtze when answers to this question began to surface.

**VI. Thomas Joshua Cooper (b.1946) *The World's Edge – the Atlantic Basin Project – An Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity***



**Ref 29 Thomas Joshua Cooper, 'Uncharted Dangers' Prime Head, 'The North-Most Point of Continental Antarctica 63°13'S' Source: scanned image from Cooper, T. J. *True* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2009).**

While mapping photographers insist on the objective description of the factual landscape, Scotland-based artist Thomas Joshua Cooper embarked on the most ambitious solo mapping project, and produced nothing topographic. For over 20 years, Cooper systematically photographed the edge of the entire Atlantic Basin for his project *The World's Edge – the Atlantic Basin Project – An Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*. Often with great difficulties, he travelled to hundreds of locations in Western Europe, North and South America, the Arctic and the Antarctic, including the North and South Pole. His photographic zones focused solely on the edge where land meets the sea. Most of his pre-selected photo locations are geological extremities: the 'north-most point of xxx' or the 'most southerly point of xxx'. Some have historical significance, such as the Kong Frederik IX Land as '*The first European settlement*



*point in Greenland'* (Copper, 2009: 75). Many were extremely remote, requiring tremendous effort to reach. For example, to get to Prime Head, where fewer people have stood than those on the moon, Cooper actually sailed for more than 50 days over uncharted waters (Tufnell, 2009). Upon arrival, he followed his self-imposed rule to take only one photograph with his five-by-seven-inch film camera. And finally, what makes the whole project a puzzle is the content of that one photograph. Almost always facing the sea, Cooper's images typically lack horizon, scale of reference or any cultural structures. Most of them are just the blurring water, without any factual information on his terrific journey or the actual topography of the hard-gained destination.

How can we understand these photographs that represent a stark contrast to everything that I have reviewed in this chapter? The most unique character of photography, when compared with other media, is its ability to document. It is the belief that via observing and describing the appearance of the outside world, some kind of truth can be learned. However, photography is also very limited. It records everything but reveals very little. Highly dependent on its context, a photograph's meaning shifts endlessly and does not point to any concrete understanding. As a photographer who is more interested in the unseen than the seen (Tufnell, 2009), Cooper took full advantage of photography's limit of revealing anything concrete. He did not even photograph much in concrete forms. Such an approach creates a vast, imagined space formed by the massive misalignment between the extreme physicality of the project, the endless complexities embedded in the locations, and the extreme 'emptiness' in the images. In this way, his physical journeys, although not represented in the photographs, are firmly part of the overall concept of the project. They are not just the means to make a photograph. They are the work.

Cooper's pictures are almost total abstraction of a potentially highly varied world. By doing this, he destabilises everything that we have discussed about the topographic landscapes. The method and aesthetics of mapping within landscape photography are 'integrated with Western notions of empiricism, especially its core belief that knowledge should be based on disinterested observation, not personal opinion' (Marien, 2002: 23). However, in the ideas of postmodernism, the authority of scientific knowledge and objectivity has been under serious attack. This seems to be opening up questions about different knowledge systems. What kind of knowledge can photographs supply? Can they supply knowledge at all? What is knowledge? Can my subjective understanding of Cooper's 'void' be seen as 'knowledge'? What is the world, seen from Cooper's project?

Does the *Atlantic Basin Project* address anything mythic? Cooper (2008) states that the project is 'almost abstract meditation on the process of globalization, and the wandering transoceanic evolution of Western culture, and the human stories wrapped up in this grand sweep'.<sup>28</sup> But his photographs are so open that they do not address anything sociopolitical directly. Perhaps what Cooper's project reminds us is that the authority in science, objectivity and concrete knowledge is mythic in its own right. His work indicates the vast complexities and potential contradictions in a seemingly objective way of photographing. He asks how the landscape might appear if one experiences it with the body and the mind instead of the eye.

The *Atlantic Basin Project* also demonstrates that the process of a project, including duration of time, multiple space and an individual's experiences, can be conceptually integrated into the work. Here the process is more than necessity or personal needs. It functions as one pole, working with the photographs to stretch the boundary of the invisible space between them. When encountering the work, the viewers' first question may be: but why produce such

photographs that represent nothing of the epic journeys? This is an important step towards further interpretation.

## **Chapter conclusion**

By reviewing selected works, I have discussed in detail the potential of mapping as a method and an aesthetic in challenging myths comparable with Yangtze The Mother River, such as the American landscapes and the English countryside. I have, in theory, placed my artistic lineage within this loose group of 'documentary landscape practices'. Such practice had seen precedent in photographers in nineteenth-century American survey photography and then became a milestone in contemporary critical landscape photography with the *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition in 1975. It then developed into a rich pool of practices influenced by various other factors such as colour photography, traditional landscape paintings, conceptual and land art, and science and imaging technology.

A common strength with these diverse works includes the belief that a detailed photographic description of the external world, free from an artist's personal prejudices and judgement, can supply factual information of the land, which leads to critical understanding of the landscapes and the myths associated with them. To work in this way and on national-level subjects, the selected photographers here employed different 'mapping' methods to discover the 'uncommon' landscapes, to construct and to strengthen the sense of 'objectivity' in the work, and to explore complexity within the pictures and around their sociopolitical contexts.

Although many works contain environmental concerns, none can be classified as 'environmental'. They do not overtly advocate preservation for the sake of human benefits, nor do they construct binaries between nature and culture, or between the present and the

past. The 'man-altered' landscapes are their subjects to discuss wider, more complex issues. Meanwhile, one common landscape featured in many cases here is the vernacular landscape. This is very interesting, as the 'uncommon' landscapes in the ideas of myths seem to be precisely the most common landscapes – the ones so ordinary that we cease to notice them.

Jackson (1984) sees landscapes in two main categories: the political and the vernacular. The former includes mainly man-made structures primarily serving political functions such as boundaries, roads, public spaces and monuments. Most of the 'hallowed sites and scenery' (Daniels, 1993: 5) that represent a national identity as well as its ideologies and myths belong to the political category. They are built to impress and are more visible. On the other hand, the vernacular landscape 'evolves in the course of our trying to live on harmonious terms with the natural world surrounding us...this inhabited landscape is much older and still the most common' (Jackson, 1984: 42). The word 'harmonious' might be overly optimistic here, but what we can see from chapter I, within the idea and the image representation of Yangtze the Mother River, is that the vernacular landscapes are almost always absent. Given their potential in providing an antithesis to myths (as seen in many case studies here), they could be very effective as an agent in challenging the Mother River myth. Such subject matter can be combined with a 'mapping' aesthetic, which embraces complexity of the landscape in various ways.

As the Yangtze is the most internationally portrayed river in China, there is an abundance of historical and contemporary work outside the mainstream portrayal, as reviewed in chapter I. Among these portrayals, many are already engaging in the critical observation of China's landscape transformation, which are relevant to the Mother River myth. In the next chapter, I will contextualise this research project within such practices with the Yangtze River as the

sole subject. This is to identify what critical observations have been made towards various issues on the Yangtze River, and what fields remain to be explored.

## **Chapter III**

### **Photographing the Yangtze – A Wider Context**

As the frontier of China's modernisation, the Yangtze has been intensely photographed since the 1840s. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam, announced in 1992, became a catalyst for photographers to critically examine China's new development with the Yangtze as a focal point. In this chapter, I will review selected Yangtze photography cases that, together with chapter I, form a brief history of Yangtze River photography. Three eras are drawn upon with different focuses: foreign and pre-PRC Chinese photographers' work is included in the era before the 1950s – the early stage of China's modernisation and the pre-Yangtze-dam era; Chinese mainstream propaganda work in the era between the 1950s and 1980s (see chapter I) – ideological preparation for China's large-scale modernisation and the Yangtze dams; and critical photography by both Chinese and foreign photographers from the 1990s onwards – criticism of China's modernisation and Yangtze dams.

The division of these eras is certainly artificial. They are interwoven and constantly shape each other while the mainstream media persuasion prevails today. But differences do exist in their politics, ideologies, dissemination and cultural influences. The purpose for this chapter is therefore to critically investigate the complexities of the photographic representation of the Yangtze River and to explore the interplay between methods, aesthetics, context and politics that exists within the interpretation of each work in China and wider geo-political terrains. Through such contextualisation, I aim to position my own work and intentions while asking how my work can contribute to such a vast pool of Yangtze imagery.

#### **Part I: Historical Yangtze photography: 1840s–1940s**

The first possible photographic event in China was recorded within the context of Britain's colonial invasion of China in 1842, the last year of the First Opium War (1839–1842).<sup>29</sup> Harry Parkes, then on board the British warship *HMS Queen* sailing up the Yangtze River, wrote in his journal for Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> July:

*Major Malcolm and Dr Woosnam took a sketch of the place today on their Daguerreotype. I cannot understand it at all: but on exposing a highly polished steel plate to the sun by the aid of some glues or other it takes the scene before you on the plate...*  
(Bennett, 2009: 1)<sup>30</sup>

Although no photograph has been found resulting from that event, the Yangtze did begin to receive ever-increasing attention from international travellers, photographers and explorers. Following the navigation adventures of the British navy and the sequential opening of treaty ports on the Yangtze River, including Shanghai (1842), Hankou (1861), Yichang (1877) and Chongqing (1891), photographic exploration of the Yangtze River exploded, mostly with colonial interest. Such photographs documented traditional China in the earliest stages of modernisation while the spread of photography to China was almost parallel to China's adaptation to its new era.

### **I. John Thomson (1837–1921)<sup>31</sup>**

Between 1868 and 1872, the Scottish photographer John Thomson travelled intensely through China, photographing diverse subjects including people, customs, and urban and natural landscapes. In 1871, he sailed on the Yangtze River from Shanghai, reaching as far as Hubei and Sichuan provinces, and produced some of the earliest systematic photographs of the Three Gorges. Between 1873 and 1890, he actively published his work resulting from travelling in China, including the four volumes of *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1874).<sup>32</sup> It was through his publications and other dissemination activities such as speaking as a member of the Royal Geographic Society that his work provided some of the earliest photographic impressions of China and the Yangtze River to Western audiences.

Thomson's influential work has been widely accepted in the West and in China as one of the pioneering ethnographic, therefore scientific, studies of late-Qing China. Meanwhile, that Thomson's gaze is in fact an imperial one and that his work served British readers' various interests in China as an imperial target have been well argued by scholars such as Belknap (2014) and Chang (2010). What I am interested in for the context of this research lies elsewhere.



Ref 30 John Thomson, *The Wu-shan Gorge, Upper Yangtze* (1871), from the book *Illustrations of China and Its People*, volume iii, plate XXIV, no. 51, ct 3110.





Ref 31 John Thomson, *The Tsing-tan Rapid, Upper Yangtze* (1871), from the book *Illustrations of China and Its People*, volume iii, plate XXII. Image copyright PDM.



Ref 32 John Thomson, *Island Pagoda* (about 1871), from the book *Foochow and the River Min*, 1873. Image copyright PDM.

As stated by Chang (2010), a visual imagination of China already existed within the British public before the inventory of photography. Such images were mainly inspired by the idea of Chinese gardens and stereotypical pictures seen on imported goods, such as the 'willow pattern' printed on porcelain made in China as well as in Britain. Chang points out that by the late eighteenth century, with the full swing of industrialisation in Britain and the difficulties in correcting trade imbalances with China, the public view of China began to change. From the ordered civilisation with a utopian undertone as described by earlier travellers, China was now seen as a country in decay, **having stagnated** in its past and **turned** a blind eye to the advance of science from the West. Within such a context, Chang argues that Thomson went to China with existing ideas and produced images that reinforced them. For example, upon entering a Chinese garden, Thomson (1875: 256) wrote that:

*Once arrived inside, we seem for the first time to realize the Chinese pictured to us in our schoolboy days. Here we see model of Chinese gardening; dropping willows, shady walk, and sunny lotus pool, on which gilded love barges float. Here too, standing a lake, and the well-known willow pattern bridge, with a pavilion hard by. But we miss the two love-birds....*

Such text, argues Chang (2010: 157), reveals 'an imagined Chinese aesthetics' domination of China's realistic representation'. This notion of a Western visual imagination and mythification towards traditional China is an interesting issue. Thomson's photographs of historical Chinese buildings, such as *Island Pagoda* in Ref 32, evoke a strong sense of harmony and picturesque beauty, which reinforce the Western idea of traditional China at the time. However, as China itself embraces modernisation, a visual mythification of its own past is beginning to take shape. Within my research of many contemporary works, I have detected a common tendency to mythify traditional China into an ordered society in which a harmonic relationship existed between humanity and nature. Subsequently, much of such works' criticism towards contemporary China can be argued as based on a myth. I will discuss this in detail later in this chapter.

Thomson's photographs of the Three Gorges are some of the most picturesque among his work in China. For an area famed for its deadly torrent and towering mountains, Thomson produced photographs with an emphasis on the calmness of the landscape. Could this be explained by technical reasons alone since a slow shutter speed could result in a blurred water image? Or could it be extended to a reading that, for Thomson, the river was to be tamed (by Western science) instead of being feared? His text supports the second reading. Having calmly described in length the Chinese boatman's fear of navigating the Tsing-tan Rapid (and the fact that they only did it for money), Thomson (1874) stated that

*I see no reason why the kind of steamer Captain Blakiston has suggested should not navigate this, and indeed any of the other rapids on the river....Were the river once opened to trade, daring and scientific skill would be forthcoming to accomplish the end in view.*<sup>33</sup>

In texts such as this, Thomson's view of the superior Western technology was made clear. In this way, Thomson's images and text made a considerable contribution to the knowledge in the Western context with a strong colonial interest. His expeditions and discoveries in China were driven by an imperial desire and in turn satisfied the interest and taste of his readers in Britain.

I have been unable to find evidence of earlier dissemination of Thomson's work in China before the 1990s. However, the mainstream Chinese photography in the Three Gorges area, which I reviewed in chapter I, has very little visual difference from these earliest pictures taken by Thomson. How can we understand this universal picturesque rendering of the natural landscapes at the Three Gorges? To extend from W. J. T. Mitchell's (1994) idea of the imperial landscapes, the golden age of Three Gorges photography in China since the 1950s has also been the age of China's naturalised invasion towards its natural space. In this way, British photography in the nineteenth century and Chinese photography in the twentieth century actually share a common ground, which is to modernise the Yangtze River. Thomson's

work did not contribute directly to the making of Yangtze The Mother River because it was not directly disseminated in China at the time. However, the modernising ideology that influenced Thomson also influenced the Chinese mainstream photographers nearly a century later. In this thesis, Thomson's work serves as an example to demonstrate two factors: the first is the mythification of traditional China since its modern age began; the second is the new position of the Yangtze River and Three Gorges within the new age, expressed in Thomson's work and then adopted by the Chinese government. In this context, China is part of the global, modernising community that sees nature as a material resource for large, industrial transformation.



## II. Joseph Rock (1884–1962)<sup>34</sup>

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THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE



THE LIKIANG GORGE OF THE YANGTZE SEEN FROM THE LOYÜ TRAIL

"The cliffs rise steeply on both sides, culminating in jagged crags and pinnacles, and above these tower the ice-crowned peaks of the Likiang snow range" (see text, page 186). The main peak of the Dyinaloko Range, the mountain mass in the background, is not visible.

Ref 33 A scanned page of the article 'Through the Great River Trenches of Asia' by Joseph Rock in the *National Geographic Magazine*, August 1926. The photograph depicts the Jinsha Jiang (Yangtze River) in a deep valley walled with snow mountains. Scanned article supplied by the British Library.



A SMILE FROM A CITIZEN OF THE FORBIDDEN LAND

This bright Tibetan boy, who uses his hair as a quiver for his arrows, was photographed on the bank of the Mekong, on the author's trip to the Dokeria.

Ref 34 A scanned page of the article 'Through the Great River Trenches of Asia' by Joseph Rock in *the National Geographic Magazine* in August 1926. Scanned article supplied by the British Library.

Between 1922 and 1949, the Austrian–American botanist, explorer and photographer Joseph Rock resided in Lijiang, an ancient Nakhi town<sup>35</sup> by the Yangtze River in Yunnan Province, 2,000 kilometres from the river source. Rock initially went to Lijiang as a botanist, collecting plant specimen and sending them back to the States. Very soon he became the explorer for the *National Geographic Magazine (NGM)* in that region and conducted many expeditions in Lijiang, Zhongdian and the headwater area of the Yellow River in Gansu and Shanxi provinces. Rock's photographs of the Jinsha River (the name of the Yangtze in this region) were among

the earliest ever produced in this region. Through his ten articles in *NGM* between 1922 and 1935, Western readers were introduced to the local landscapes, people, customs, plants and animals. Rock was also very active in researching the local Nakhi language and culture. After returning to the US in 1949, he compiled *A Nakhi-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, which was a major contribution to the study of the ancient Nakhi language.<sup>36</sup>

Rock's richly illustrated *NGM* articles produced an interesting 'by-product' – Shangri-La. First appearing in the English writer James Hilton's blockbuster novel *Lost Horizon* in 1933, Shangri-La was described as a mystical, harmonious valley enclosed in the western end of the Kunlun Mountains while gently guided from a lamasery. Since its creation, Shangri-La has become synonymous with an earthly paradise and a mythical Himalayan utopia – a permanently happy and exotic land isolated from the outside world. Having enjoyed enormous popularity in the West, Shangri-La won the heads and hearts of its Chinese audiences too. In 2001, Zhongdian (中甸), a Tibetan town near Rock's old residency, decided to rename itself 香格里拉 (Xianggelila, the Chinese transliteration of Shangri-La) in a quest to attract tourists.

The new Shangri-La and its surrounding areas, particularly Lijiang, have since been manufactured into an almost Disney-like theme park with Rock's old residency now preserved as a museum.<sup>37</sup> The spectacular landscapes including Tiger Leaping Gorge and the Great Bend, both on the Yangtze River, and the exotic local culture are the main tourist attractions. Interestingly, as outsiders, we know very little about Shangri-La other than it being a tourist destination. Meanwhile, there is a tendency to mythify the western borderlands of China, where ethnic groups reside. After traditional China, this exotic western land is often seen as somewhere where repressed ethnic groups live in harmony with nature. My contextual research shows that the Shangri-La area is in fact one of the poorest in China.

Mining and hydropower are the two main industries there, while the proposition of damming Tiger Leaping Gorge has created much international controversy. What does Shangri-La look like outside of its mythical front? I hoped that by photographing the river at equal distances, I will gain some insights into the mythic local landscapes.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that although the gorges in Lijiang, for example Tiger Leaping Gorge (虎跳峡) with a depth of over 3,000 metres, are much more spectacular than the Three Gorges, they have never been part of the Yangtze's 'national portfolio'. Again, a cultural hierarchy may be at play here. The remote Jinsha River is hard to reach and inhabited by ethnic minorities, such as the Tibetans and the Naxi people. Apart from Nadav Kander<sup>139</sup>, who documented this area in recent years, very few critical photographers have visited this region since Rock. Worse still, I have found no images of the river upstream from Shangri-La to Tuotuoheyan (沱沱河沿), except tourist images of some Tibetan monasteries. The case of Shangri-La clearly demonstrates the necessity of photographically exploring this region and beyond, to ensure the landscapes are made visible without mythification.



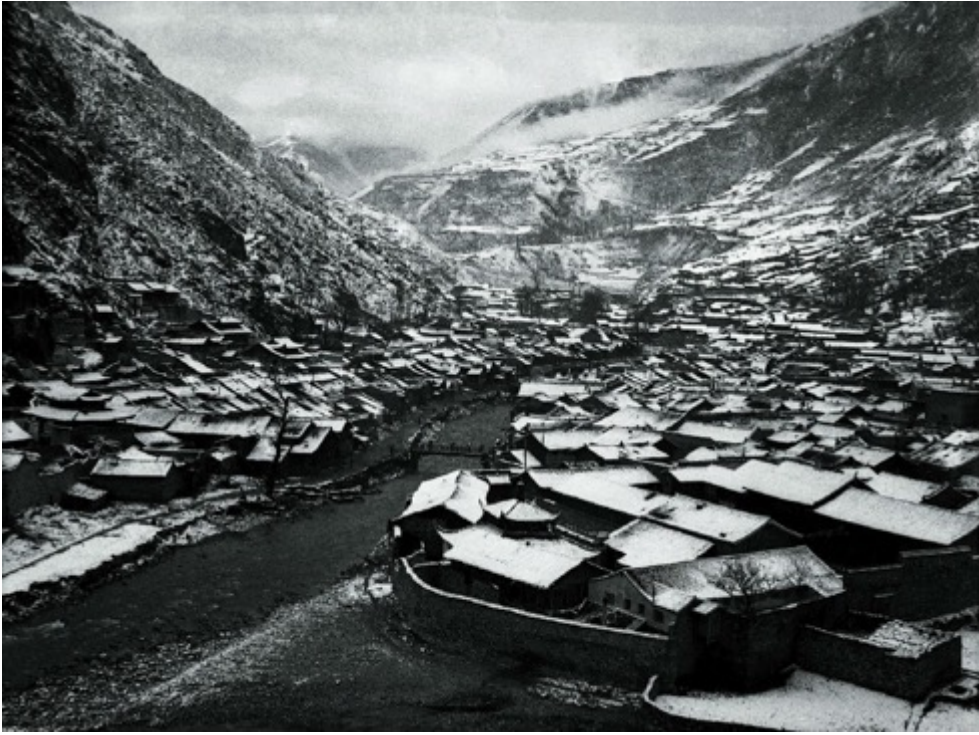
III. Lang Jingshan (also known as Long Chinsan, 郎静山, 1892–1995), Sha Fei (沙飞, 1912–1950) and Zhuang Xueben (庄学本, 1909–1984)



Ref 35 Lang Jingshan(郎静山), *Riverside Spring* (晓汲春江), 1942. Scanned image from *Master Long Chinsan's 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection* (Taipei: Long Chinsan Artistic and Cultural Developing Association, 2011).



Ref 36 Sha Fei (沙飞), *Fighting on the Ancient Great Wall* (战斗在古长城), 1937. Image source: [http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/treatise\\_latest\\_050.htm](http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/treatise_latest_050.htm), accessed on 13 February 2017.



Ref 37 Zhuang Xueben(庄学本), *Snow Landscape of Kangdi Old Town (康定老城雪景)*, 1938. Scanned image from Zhuang, Xueben *Complete Photography Collection of Zhuang Xueben* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2009). (The river in the photograph is most likely a tributary of the Yangtze River as Kangdi is within the Yangtze catchment.)



Ref 38 Zhuang Xueben(庄学本), *A Tibetan Youth, Shiqu Country, Sichuan Province (藏族青年, 四川石渠)*, 1937. Scanned image from Zhuang, Xueben *Complete Photography Collection of Zhuang Xueben* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2009).



Ref 39 The front cover of 'Xikang Special Issue' (1940) of The Young Companion (*Liang You* 良友) with Zhuang Xueben's photograph. Image downloaded from <https://fangfeichen.wordpress.com/2015/07/22/zhuang-xueben-the-front-cover-of-xikang-special/> on 03 February 2016.

In the century after photography was introduced to the country, China was going through a turbulent period in history, trying to establish a modern identity with the means of modern communication tools. Chinese society was going through profound social, political and cultural changes while facing foreign invasions and civil wars. The definition, ideology and physical boundary of China were facing constant challenges (Spence and Chin, 1996). It was within this context that photography by Chinese practitioners appeared and grew.<sup>39</sup>

I have not been able to find any substantial work on the main course of the Yangtze River by Chinese photographers in the nineteenth century. However, an overview of the period and several relevant cases can provide a general impression of how photography may have contributed to the modern culture of China at the time. Chinese commercial photographers were already active in the second half of the nineteenth century, producing portraits and landscapes of scenic views (*Jing*) for commissions or photo albums to sell to Western and Chinese customers. Some panoramic views of rivers in Fujian Province and landscape views of

famous sites were produced in this context, but little was seen of the Yangtze River. Also, their work was not widely circulated in China because of the limits in dissemination channels (Cody and Terpak, 2011).

From the 1910s, Chinese photography welcomed its first boom era; salon photography and photojournalism flourished with the explosive development of pictorial journals and newspapers. Such development generally echoed the new modern culture emerging in China. Landscape photography was developed, often with the heavy influence of traditional Shanshui aesthetics and accepted ideas of *Jing* (iconic views). Within them, Lang Jingshan (Ref 35), with his composite pictures, reached a pinnacle of creating seamless photographic montages that resembled Shanshui paintings in both spirit and form.<sup>40</sup>

When Lang began to develop such photograph montages in the 1930s, China was experiencing a traumatic war era and the Yangtze River was the physical battlefield for the Sino-Japan War and the Civil Wars. By creating such photographs, Lang paid more respect to his artistic heritage than to the reality of the river. Such images were produced and published in small quantities, and Lang only established his reputation for composite pictures after he moved to Taiwan in 1949. Renewing Shanshui traditions with photographic means can be seen as a way to maintain a Chinese artistic identity in an age of foreign invasions and cultural influences. It can also be seen as the insistence on traditional values when facing the new and powerful modern ideology. But the relatively small influence of composite pictures in China in this period means that they did not largely contribute to the cultural or political life at the time. Meanwhile, none of Lang's composite pictures were dedicated to the Yangtze River. It appears that the Yangtze River was not yet a national icon as it is now.

In contrast, the Great Wall was actively used by the Communist party's photojournalist Sha Fei (Ref 36) to form a pictorial anti-invasion campaign. Borrowing the existing iconic meaning of the Great Wall as China's historical self-defence effort, Sha Fei staged this photograph titled *Fighting on the Ancient Great Wall* (战斗在古长城) in 1937, depicting soldiers of the Eighth Route Army aiming at (implied) enemies with the backdrop of the Great Wall. The slightly back-lit effect and sweeping composition glorify the scene while giving it historical depth. This image, among other wartime photographs by Sha Fei, was published in 1943 in CCP's official periodical *Jin, Cha, Ji Pictorial* (晋察冀画报) and was soon taken up to represent China's national anti-imperial spirit. The picture's iconic status is still evident to this day.<sup>41</sup>

It is unclear why the Yangtze was not employed in such a pictorial campaign. Perhaps it was because the river was not traditionally associated with the meaning similar to the Great Wall? But there was one photographer who actively worked within the Yangtze headwater area and contributed to the formation of China's national identity at the time. From 1934 to 1945, the Shanghai-born photographer Zhuang Xueben (Ref 37, 38 and 39) repeatedly travelled to western China and spent the war years (1937–1945) in the newly formed province of Xikang, not far from Yunnan Province where Joseph Rock was based. At the time, the Japanese imperial army occupied north-western China, and they pushed their army along the Yangtze River to central China. The west, largely the headwater areas of the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, was China's last reserve at the time. The Nationalist Party government had made strategic plans to unite and develop the western borderlands of China (Zhuang, 2009). As a young, self-taught photographer from an ordinary family, Zhuang responded to such a calling by making self-assigned trips to photograph China's western frontier. In over ten years, he covered a wide range of local ethnic groups while systematically photographing all aspects of their lives. In 1941, Zhuang organised touring exhibitions with materials created

and collected from his journeys. Over 200,000 people visited the exhibitions in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Ya'an – all three cities are on or close to the Yangtze River's main course.

As a regular contributor to the biggest pictorial *The Yong Companion* (*Liang You*, 良友),<sup>42</sup> in China at the time, Zhuang's essays echoed the national policy of developing the western borderlands by discussing all aspects of social infrastructure, including the mineral resources and possibilities to modernise the area. As one of very few voices from such borderlands of China, Zhuang's images and writings of different social groups, customs, geologies and geographies contributed greatly to demystifying the area and to incorporating them into a new Chinese national identity, which was in urgent need in the war years. In doing so, Zhuang acquired a similar position to that of John Thomson. He was part of the modernisation ideology at the time in China, and aided the naturalisation and dissemination of such ideology through publishing his work. Yajun Mo (2015) considered Zhuang Xueben's identity as a Han photographer from central China, and Mo therefore places Xueben's work within the political context of government propaganda. According to Mo the Nationalist Party's need to unify China could also be seen as a way to expand and slowly 'nibble' through its neighbouring land. Meanwhile, Mo argues that Zhuang's photographs emphasise the differences between the ethnic minorities and the Han people, therefore strengthening the dominant position of himself and the Han.

Although Zhuang did not consciously engage the Yangtze River as his subject matter, many of his images featured landscapes and people along the Yangtze's tributaries. Considering that his work was among the earliest Chinese photography to depict lives closer to the headwaters of the Yangtze and to be published in the public media, Zhuang's images and writing helped to prepare one important aspect of the 'Mother River' myth, which was to naturalise modern China's political unification with the analogy of one natural river.



## **Conclusions on the historial Yangtze River photography between 1840s and 1940s**

The history of the Yangtze River photography is a witness of modernity's history in China. These early cases demonstrate the process during which modernity was at first forced into China with colonial invasion, then taken up by the Chinese as its own national ideology to develop central as well as borderland areas. Such photographic history can be compared with the photographic history of the American West, which is shaped by the works of early pioneers such as Carleton Watkins and Timothy H. O'Sullivan (Mitchell, 1994). But in the case of China, one added complexity lies in the fact that early photographic explorations were carried out by foreign photographers and disseminated outside of China. Meanwhile, China's historical position in relation to the West and other more developed countries (such as Japan and Russia) means that Chinese photographs may be interpreted very differently inside and outside of China. This helps to clarify some context of my own work. Although my work will be disseminated internationally, its critical intention against the myth of the Mother River will be primarily aimed at the Chinese audiences who have pre-existing ideas of the Mother River.

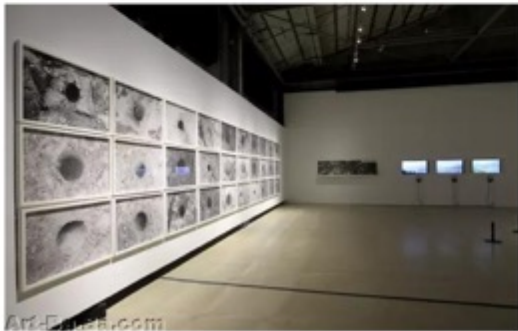
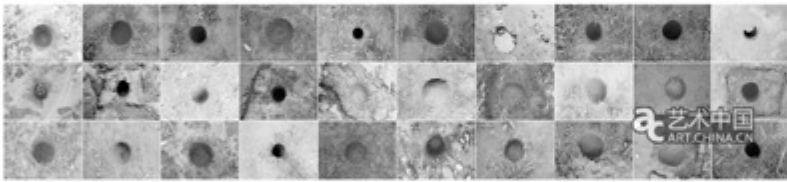
Setting politics aside, early Yangtze photography can be seen as a series of mapping expeditions and 'discoveries'. These pioneers all conducted daring expeditions into difficult regions. They photographed scenes and people that were never photographed before. Their work is now part of a historical archive internationally, supplying visual and contextual information to a knowledge base that would otherwise have remained hidden. Such knowledge is not limited within the photographic or artistic field. It can also be extended to geology, geography and ethnography. Many contemporary photographers' work on the Yangtze River to be discussed in this chapter, including my own work, will also eventually become part of this historical archive.

## **Part II: Critical contemporary Chinese Yangtze photographers: 1990s - 2016**

Having been completely absorbed in Chinese mainstream media's propaganda system since the 1950s, the Yangtze River became a strong domestic and international interest again in the last decade of the twentieth century with the announcement of construction of the Three Gorges Dam in 1992.<sup>43</sup> By this time, the West had already entered an era of critical reflection on the project of modernity, and photography had been systematically employed as a tool to aid such reflection. Environmental and ecological concerns had become a firm part in the developed countries as one aspect to criticise capitalist society's endless need for economic growth. Within China, although the overall ideology has been to industrialise and to urbanise the country, the huge cost of such transformation was laid bare, possibly for the first time, to be examined by projects such as the Three Gorges Dam. The project would flood 600 kilometres of historical land, including some of the most iconic landscapes in China. It would also displace nearly two million people from their homeland and severely affect the existing ecology in the local area and the areas below the dam. The sudden and brutal transformation of the Three Gorges landscapes touched issues as deep as national and personal identities. The physical impact of the Three Gorges Dam, when seen in the current context of strong environmental concerns, became a focus and reason for photographers to critically observe China's development. This is an interesting situation – in the nineteenth century, the Three Gorges area was the battlefield for the rights of steam-powered navigation between China and foreign powers. Over a century later, the same area became the icon and frontier for China's modernisation again. This time, the battle appears to be fought between 'nature' and 'culture', between 'tradition' and 'modernity', as well as between 'the individual' and the 'state'.



## I. Initial responses from Chinese artists



Ref 40 Zhuang Hui (庄辉), *Longitude 109.88° Latitude 31.09°* (东经 109. 88 北纬 31. 09), 1995–2007. Image source: [http://artnow.com.cn/masterart/201404/article\\_98.html](http://artnow.com.cn/masterart/201404/article_98.html), accessed on 20 December 2016.

Chinese artists' earliest response to the Three Gorges Dam can probably be traced to Zhuang Hui's (庄辉, b. 1963) work *Longitude 109.88° Latitude 31.09°*, made in 1995 and 2007. In 1995, one year after the Three Gorges Dam project began, Zhuang Hui chose one site in each of the Three Gorges – Baidicheng (白帝城) at the entrance of Qutang Gorge (瞿塘峡) (39), Sandouping (三斗坪) where the concrete dam would be erected, and Wu Gorge (巫峡) – and dug over one hundred holes in the ground before photographing them. In 2007, after the main construction of the dam was completed, he hired a cameraman to film the original locations of the holes. They were all underwater now. The brutality of the Three Gorges Dam and the helpless loss caused by it were effectively conveyed by this body of work.

Zhuang's work initiated a wave of Chinese photography criticising the Three Gorges Dam and China's modernisation. 'Displacement' is a common theme. As seen in the title of the exhibition *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art* curated by Wu Hung, this term is defined as 'forced resettlement caused by war, government policies, or other societal actions that requires a large number of people to abandon their homes and move to new places' (Wu, 2008). Here, the notion of 'being forced to leave one's homeland' is the centre of criticism while a likely result of being displaced, 'misplaced', is implied.

A break from history is another common view of China's recent development. As indicated in the book title *An Era without Memories* (Jiang, 2015), the urbanisation of China has demolished so much of the traditional landscapes infused in one's memories and sense of home. The new cities, although built according to the latest idea of what modern living ought to be, fail to provide a sense of being a homeland. Indeed, one strong collective understanding of the Yangtze River is that of a physical and spiritual homeland.

## **II. The Yangtze as a (lost) homeland**

Photographers living in the Three Gorges region most acutely felt the dam's impact. Most of them are from Yichang (宜昌, the downstream border city of the dam) and Chongqing (重庆, the upper stream border city of the dam, 600 kilometres away from Yichang). Many have been taking photographs in the gorges for a long time and have extensive local knowledge as well as deep, personal attachment to the area. In 2001, the Yichang-based photographer Xiao Xiao'an (肖萱安, b.1960) initiated his project *Three Gorges Immigrant Archive*. He photographed the soon-to-be-displaced local residents in the gorges with a symbolic white frame – white is the colour used for funerals in China. In 2006, he made a final visit to the

historical Xiayan Temple (下岩寺) within the flood zone and photographed the Buddha sculptures in the process of being submerged forever.



Ref 41 Xiao Xuan'an(肖萱安), *Xiayan Temple-Salvage Before Flooding* (下岩寺), 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.





Ref 42 Xiao Xuan'an (肖萱安), *Three Gorges Immigrant Archive* (三峡移民档案), 2001. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 43 Yan Changjiang (颜长江), *Hanging* (上吊), 2005. Image courtesy of the artist.

Meanwhile, Xiao's long-term collaborator Yan Changjiang (颜长江, b.1968) went a step further in expressing his view. Yan's given name 'Changjiang' is basically the name of the Yangtze River commonly known in China. Yan's family came from Sandouping, the exact place where the concrete dam would be constructed. Yan visited the Three Gorges area repeatedly during the construction of the dam and produced several bodies of work mixing straight documentary images with work from performative process. In Ref 41, Yan performed being hung from the roof of a derelict historical temple, which is overpowered by the modern bridge above. For both Xiao and Yan, it is the extensive local knowledge and the strong personal connection that give the work its authority. They are powerful and direct in expressing the sadness, loss and terror caused by the Three Gorges Dam construction. In Xiao's work, even the Buddha could not escape the fate of permanent flooding – here, the Buddha and its host temple can be understood as the long history of the local region and China's traditional culture. Meanwhile, it appears that Yan was willing to sacrifice himself with the dying history and homeland.

Some Yichang-based photographers stepped back and produced landscape images of the area. Between 2009 and 2013, Li Ming (黎明, b.1976) created the series *Homeland* (家园) in the Three Gorges and a few other places in China. These moody, black-and-white images have obvious attachment to Shanshui paintings. Their reference to Shanshui is mainly in the grey tonality and a lyrical, distant feeling. Even the colossal dam itself is enveloped in this atmosphere and rendered less imposing. The series title is crucial: what he portrays is 'home'. On this level, the Yangtze River is more like a distant, spiritual home that belongs more to a historical memory than to the contemporary reality.



Ref 44 Li Ming(黎明), *Homeland (家园)*, 2009–2013. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 45 Li Ming(黎明), *Homeland (家园)*, 2009–2013. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 46 Li Ming(黎明), *Homeland (家园)*, 2009–2013. Image courtesy of the artist.

Since 2011, another Yichang-based photographer Li Zhaohui (李朝晖, 1968) began a series on the Yangtze River with a similar title: *Homeland: The Long River*. He started by concentrating on the Three Gorges Dam area in the era of mass demolition and construction, and then gradually visited many cities between Yibin and Shanghai. Often working in misty weather, his images are realistic while his observation is discreet and lyrical. His relationship to the landscape is both knowing and intimate. He pays attention to the vernacular landscapes, many of which contain traces of lost homes and the re-making of traditional artefacts. There is no grand narrative or obvious political issue. The low contrast, muted colours, open sky and fragmented views represent a homeland that is perhaps lost in between the flooding and the re-making.



Ref 47 Li Zhaohui (李朝晖), *Homeland: The Long River (家园: 长江)*, ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 48 Li Zhaohui (李朝晖), *Homeland: The Long River (家园: 长江)*, ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist.





Ref 49 Li Zhaohui (李朝晖), *Homeland: The Long River (家园:长江)*, ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ref 50 Li Zhaohui (李朝晖), *Homeland: The Long River (家园:长江)*, ongoing. Image courtesy of the artist.

On the other side of the Three Gorges, the Chongqing-born performance artist Xing Xin (幸鑫, b.1981) also engaged in work on the Yangtze River, but with broader themes. In 2008, after swimming in the Yangtze River with his father while feeling overwhelmed by the giant bridge overhead, Xing conducted a piece titled *Free and Easy Wandering*(逍遥游). *Free and Easy Wandering (or, Wandering in Absolute Freedom)* is the opening essay in the book *Zhuang Zi* – the most fundamental text for Taoism from the late Warring States period (战国, 476–221 BC). The essay advocated the author Zhuang Zhou’s belief in absolute freedom, namely freedom without social ties, responsibility, achievement, or even without the sense of self-identity. Taoism is one of the founding philosophies of Han Chinese and directly influenced the Shanshui aesthetic in which humans are seen as an inherent part of nature. By naming the work as such, Xing Xin is deliberately referencing the ideas of Taoism.

Dressed in white, traditional clothes, Xing floated down the Yangtze from Chongqing to a nearby town while sitting on a retro-looking, wooden bed.<sup>44</sup> With this ambiguous action, Xing invites the viewers to imagine a traditional literati’s reaction when viewing the city landscapes from this angle. The work is presented as a video piece, in which the artist’s opinion is carefully conceived. However, the possible tension between a traditional literati’s view (with a definite Taoism influence) and a modern value is implied.



Ref 51 Xing Xin(幸鑫), *Free and Easy Wandering*(逍遥游), 2008. Video still, courtesy of the artist.

In 2010, Xing Xin went to Gangjiaquba Glacier at the source of the Yangtze River and axed off a block of ice from the glacier. He then drove all the way to Shanghai and released the half-melted ice block into the mouth of the Yangtze River. Originally, the project, titled *Meditating on Floating Ice* (吾与浮冰), was designed as a way to intervene with the water cycle of the Yangtze River and to comment on contemporary environmental issues. However, the last images shot for the performance are emotionally powerful and have implications far beyond environmental problems. Instead of simply placing the ice into the river, Xing Xin floated in the water while letting the ice melt slowly on his bare chest. I understand such intimacy as a significant sign of his deep personal connection with this river.



Ref 52 Xing Xin(幸鑫), *Meditating on Floating Ice* (吾与浮冰), 2010. Image courtesy of the artist.

The above cases do not specifically engage with landscape photography. I selected them here to demonstrate that within the diverse practice of contemporary Chinese art, the Yangtze River has been actively engaged as a subject to critically respond to China's modernisation and its impact on national/personal identities as well as the environment. These artists

successfully portrayed the violence and brutality of the Three Gorges Dam. In doing so, they also expressed their deep love of this river; I share this common ground with them. For many of the local artists, the Yangtze River is not mythic. It is a homeland – a homeland at the edge of being submerged by the Three Gorges Dam.

Visually, the homeland is often represented with elements like misty weather with a slight sentiment towards the past, and a reluctance to whole-heartedly embrace the change. As seen in *Meditating on Floating Ice*, there is a critical distance between the artists and China's modernising landscape. But there is also a skin-to-skin connection between them and the river. Their view of the river is not as grand as The Mother River.

### III. Yangtze in the new Shanshui landscapes



Ref 53 Yang Yongliang(杨泳梁), 'The Crashed Airplane' (坠落的飞机), 60\*170 cm, from the series *On the Quiet Water* (止水之上), 2008. Image source: [www.yangyongliang.com](http://www.yangyongliang.com), accessed on 23 October 2015.





Ref 54 Yang Yongliang(杨泳梁), *Travellers among Mountains and Streams* (溪山行旅图), 150\*300 cm, 2014. Overall image and details. Image source: [www.yangyongliang.com](http://www.yangyongliang.com), accessed on 08 July 2014.



Ref 55 Zeng Han(曾翰) 'Still Water in Three Gorges', from *Cool Shanshui* (酷山水) series, 2007. Image source: [www.zeng-han.com](http://www.zeng-han.com), accessed on 15 April 14.





Ref 56 Xu Bing(徐冰), *Background Story 3 (背面的故事 3)*. Front and back view. Mixed-media installation, 2006. Image source: [www.xubing.com](http://www.xubing.com), accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015.

How to continue the Shanshui tradition with photographic methods has been a quest for Chinese photographers since they began to use the medium. Since Lang Jingshan in the 1930s, there has been a strong revival of interest in Shanshui aesthetics within Chinese landscape photography practice in the twenty-first century. This interest appears to coincide with the damming of the Yangtze River, which suddenly transformed a large area of natural and historical landscape that has been part of the inspiration for Shanshui paintings and landscape aesthetics for the last two millennia.

Since 2006, Shanghai-based artist Yang Yongliang (杨泳梁, b.1980) began to digitally construct Shanshui-style images with elements of the real world photographed during his field visits (Ref 53, 54). His techniques are immaculate and scales impressive – many pieces are several metres in length or height. Viewed from a distance, his images are breathtakingly beautiful with all the visual characters of a Shanshui painting. Seen up close, the astonishingly rich details in the work form a world of '*underwater paradise, sunk ships, floating buses, ruins in the water and the crashed airplanes*' (Yang, 2011). It is a world at the height of modernisation and ready to tip over – an apocalyptic view. Similar to Shanshui paintings,

Yang's images are highly generalised. There are no readily recognisable landmarks or iconic buildings. Instead, only two spaces are portrayed: the traditional and the modern, which are represented by the iconic form and the iconic contents respectively. It is the often-negative elements of the modern, such as the flooding and the broken houses, that reveal his attitude towards the contemporary reality. Indeed, Yang has stated that the '*ancient Chinese expressed their appreciation of nature and feeling for it by painting the Landscape. In contrast, I make my landscape to criticize the realities in my eyes*' (ibid.). Although his work is never explicitly associated with the Yangtze River or the Three Gorges Dam, its naming and content repeatedly reference 'water that does not flow' and flooding. For example, one groupwork was titled *On the Quiet Water* and produced in 2008 when the Three Gorges Dam was filling up towards its designed water level, which could be easily interpreted as a critique of the river's reality.

Other Chinese Shanshui photographers adopted an in-between position. They produced 'straight' photographs without digital or darkroom resemblance. But the Shanshui aesthetics are the foundation to their image construction. The long horizontal format, the misty weather, the low contrast, the black-and-white tonality, and the large 'void' occupied by still water (the dam) or by the sky are all common elements frequently employed. Sometimes the photographers combine the pictorial strategy with a project title that directly uses the term 'Shanshui' – 'mountains and waters'. Zeng Han's (曾瀚, b.1974) *Cool Shanshui* series (酷山水) (Ref 55) invites the audience to contemplate the scene with their historical memories or imaginations. Similar to Yang Yongliang's work, the form itself gives a ready-made meaning which has the risk of using a mystified traditional China to criticise the present. To borrow Zeng's (2009) statement:

*The English word Cool is a monophone to the Chinese character 酷, which means 'brutal'...it is very appropriate to describe the present world in the process of change, because the change not only represents the exciting high-speed development and*

*prosperous phenomenon, but also reveals the ubiquitous and cruel breaking power.*

The Shanghai-based photography researcher Gu Zheng (顾铮) states that such works ‘*subvert traditional Shanshui*’ (2011: 10). This is debatable. It is true that a traditional form has been renewed with contemporary content. However, such development does not touch the mythical core of Shanshui perceived within the contemporary era. To serve as a comparison, since 2004, the artist Xu Bing (徐冰, b. 1955) has created serial installations titled *Background Stories* (背面的故事) (Ref 56) . His large light boxes typically consist of two parts: viewed from the front, an image of a Shanshui masterpiece is on the frost screen; viewed from the open back, a cluster of debris is seen, such as messy grass, rubbish and scrap paper. By doing this, Xu subtly de-mythifies Shanshui and traditional Chinese landscapes. Different from Yang Yongliang, Xu Bing has recognised that Shanshui has become a myth, an illusion. Its real content can be anything as insignificant as dry grass that the artist collects randomly. If Shanshui can be as insignificant as demonstrated in Xu’s work, then the foundation of Yang Yongliang’s and Zeng Han’s criticism of contemporary China is significantly weakened.



### Part III: Critical contemporary foreign Yangtze photographers since the 2000s



Ref 57 Edward Burtynsky *Feng Jie 5 Yangtze River, China, 2002*. Image source: [www.edwardburtynsky.com](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com), accessed on 05 January 2016.



Ref 58 Edward Burtynsky *Manufactured Landscapes* film poster, with a cropped version of *Feng Jie 5*. Image source: [www.edwardburtynsky.com](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com), accessed on 05 January 2016.



Ref 59 Nadav Kander *Chongqing XI, Chongqing Municipality*, 2007 Image source: <http://publicdelivery.org/nadav-kander-yangtze-the-long-river/>, accessed on 15 July 2016.

The Three Gorges Dam and China's large-scale modernisation since the 1990s have attracted many international photographers. Compared with the local photographers who see the river as a homeland, these foreign photographers have different pre-existing ideas and tend to incorporate China within a wider, more global concern over economic growth, pollution and sustainable development. Meanwhile, their imagination towards traditional China and the Communist government, acquired from the Western media and knowledge system, plays an important role in their understanding and portrayal of this country unknown to them. Most of them worked as visiting photographers, shooting in China while disseminating their work primarily outside of China. Their aesthetics are closer to established modes in the West and their image content is firmly on the political. The scale of China's urban construction is the most frequently portrayed, for which photographers such as Michael Wolf, Peter Bialobrzeski

and Ferit Kuyas have all produced substantial bodies of work. In this section, I will review two of the most well-known bodies of work directly related to the Yangtze River.

The Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky (b.1955) was among the earliest foreign photographers who paid attention to the Three Gorges Dam. In 2002 Burtynsky began to make images in China. Starting from the Three Gorges Dam construction, he gradually photographed urban renewal, old and new industries, the recycling industry and shipbuilding yards in China. Contributing to his overall portfolio documenting the human transformation of natural landscapes, Burtynsky's images are among the most widely seen contemporary Chinese landscapes in the West.

Burtynsky's photographs of the Three Gorges Dam are overall topographic, depicting the demolished towns, the dam construction itself and the new towns built for the Yangtze immigrants. The massive scale of the physical landscapes is the key element in Burtynsky's image construction. When read in relation to the potential environmental and social issues caused by the dam, Burtynsky's photographs may be used as evidence to demonstrate the scale of China's destruction in the name of progress. This reading can be particularly relevant since his overall China series began with the demolished towns within the dam flooding zone (Burtynsky, 2005). Within the documentary mode, one particular image reveals more of Burtynsky's personal attitude towards China's 'progress'.

*Fengjie 5* (Ref 57) depicts a peasant-looking man leading his donkey away from a demolished village, which stands beneath some new modern buildings on some mountain slopes.

Although the image is not included in the book *China*, its cropped version (Ref 58) is used as the cover image for Burtynsky's award-winning film *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006). As a cover, the singling out of the human figure and format alternation give it a new significance.

The film reveals that the man was in fact modelling for the photographer, and he collected his fee afterwards from Burtynsky's assistant Noah Weinzwieg.<sup>45</sup> The man is probably a local peasant who relies on his donkey for transport, and the life he is leaving behind can be presumed to be an organic, traditional life that has been ruined, or a 'backward' one that needs to be modernised, depending on who is looking at the picture. Judging by the success of Burtynsky's film and his open environment concerns, it is the first reading that prevails in the West.

Such image coding and decoding implies a mythification of the peasant's life as an ideal, traditional life that has harmony between man and nature. Taking an extreme opposition to Burtynsky's world, it appears that within the post-colonial era, there is a tendency for the West to reduce the non-West to the level of victim of modernisation while attributing mythical traditional values to it as some kind of 'purity' and 'authenticity' (Araeen, 2000). If such tendency is somehow unconscious in Burtynsky's photographs, then it is stated clearly in the essays included in his book. In *Edward Burtynsky: China*, Marc Mayer (2005: 11) writes:

*Burtynsky's new pictures may well have been taken in China, but they are also so alien to the China of my imagination that they are hard to look at. That he was able to gain access at all to make photographs is proof enough that my sense of China as the birthplace of the landscape, as the one place on earth where nature and beauty were always synonymous, now appears to have abandoned that ideal. That in itself is quite meaningful and indicative not only of the government's pride in the country's rapid industrialization, but the extent to which the Chinese broke irrevocably with their past and its ancient values in 1949.*

Similar to John Thomson but over a century later, Mayer's 'imagination' of China is still associated with the 'willow pattern'. Meanwhile, Mayer implies that history is not a continuous flow, and that the 'past' and the 'present' can be separated artificially with a clear cut (the year of 1949 when the CCP founded the PRC). In such an argument, environmental criticism changes swiftly to political attack. The fact is that China had always been struggling with flooding from the Yangtze River since its history began and it had already begun

preparations for a Yangtze dam in the 1920s. If Burtynsky's initial environmental concern is 'objective' and his documentary pictures are 'ambiguities', then Mayer's essay certainly directs reading from the ambiguous to the political.

This emphasis on scale is consistent in Burtynsky's overall international portfolio, which reflects humanity's transformation of the natural environment. In later pictures of China, Burtynsky depicts Chinese factories, again with the emphasis on the large scale of production and the apparent dehumanisation of the workers – thousands of them are in uniform and look identical. When viewed in the particular context of China, such a deadpan, large-scale aesthetic may invoke an emotion of terror, a terror of capitalism's endless expansion. Meanwhile, his depiction of the faceless workers may strengthen the 'outside world's stereotyped impression of China' (Gu, 2012: 41).

While Burtynsky only photographed the Three Gorges Dam area on the Yangtze, the London-based photographer Nadav Kander (b.1961) made five trips from the river mouth towards its source between 2006 and 2008. Although the project claims to have followed the entire river, most published images concentrate on the urban landscapes of major cities. Within the 74 images published in Kander's monograph *Yangtze, The Long River*, 17 are of Shanghai, eight of Nanjing, seven are of the dam itself, and 20 are of the new metropolis Chongqing. Six images of Lijiang and Shangri-La (Zhongdian) are included, while seven are produced in Tuotuoheyan – the first town on the course of the Yangtze where very few images have been produced by Western photographers. Such choice of stopping places indicates that Kander's vision is more directed towards the urbanisation of China, as the majority of images were taken in some of the largest cities along the river. His image content also confirms this reading. Seventeen images include a Yangtze River bridge (Ref 59), while others were shot in urban and industrial areas.

Different from Burtynsky's apparent 'objective' gaze, Kander had a clear intention not to simply 'document' the place. Instead, he shot intuitively, editing during and after the trips while letting the theme emerge.<sup>46</sup> The resulting images are highly aestheticised: a yellowish mist/smog envelops the entire country, indicating severe air pollution while giving a sense of nostalgia. His images consist of three main elements: the vast Yangtze River whose water emerges into the sky seamlessly; the even vaster man-made structures, such as the bridges, dams and motorways; and the tiny human figures caught in some indecisive moments. A sense of uneasy stillness prevails: half-finished construction sites standing abandoned in deserted land, metal palm trees lying dead in an empty swimming pool, a river of blood being frozen underneath a broken bridge. Tiny, lone human figures are dwarfed in the vastness of the landscape, isolated from their immediate surroundings.

Kander's photobook *Yangtze, The Long River* (2010) features one essay by Jean Paul Tchang, which concisely narrates the significance of the Yangtze River to China by listing a series of historical events and other literature or media references. Towards the back of the book, Kander wrote journey stories and relevant information for many of the photographs, therefore adding a personal tone and bringing a richer understanding of the project. Reading from a personal level, *Yangtze, The Long River* is a coherent and expressive vision of a traveller in China. His pictures demonstrate the scale and depth of China's urbanisation, captured at a specific moment that has already become historic.

It is within the environmental context in the West where Kander's work has been received with the most enthusiasm. In 2009, the project won the prestigious Prix Pictet award, a global award in photography and sustainability. In *Yangtze, The Long River*, the former UN secretary general Kofi Annan (2010) writes that 'it is estimated that millions of people do not have access to drinking water in China, yet nearly half of the nation's waste water is absorbed by

the Yangtze, thus rendering it unfit for drinking. Toxins are destroying marine life; entire ecosystems are being altered or destroyed. The river, rank with pollution, is slowly dying.' Although none of this is actually depicted in Kander's images or written in his text, it is the smog-covered, deserted and still landscapes that can encourage such a reading in audiences who are highly aware of issues around environmental protection and sustainable development.

Such environmental criticism can sometimes be linked to (implied) political criticism too. Although Kander himself states that his background of being rootless as an Israeli in London and a total outsider in China is reflected in the pictures, he also writes that 'common man has little say in China's progression and this smallness of the individual is alluded to in the work'.<sup>47</sup> The power imbalance between the urban structures and human figures in Kander's pictures is largely expressed by his aesthetics, which is strongly influenced by the sublime. As an aesthetic tradition in Western landscape paintings, the sublime originally stresses nature's destructive power over human lives. In Kander's pictures, this destructive power is replaced by man-made structures while terror of self-imposed destruction is strongly implied. Meanwhile, the tension between the modern and the traditional is embedded in the overall colour tone of the images. The slightly desaturated colours and the slightly sepia tone evokes the effect of air pollution as well as a sense of nostalgia – a longing for the past and a denial of the present.

The compositional imbalance between man-made structures and lonely human figures can be read beyond humanity's self-destruction. It can be read as imposed destruction by a totalitarian government. Sean O'Hagan (2010) starts his review of Kander's work in the *Guardian* by quoting Slavoj Žižek, stating that 'China still adheres to the "basic rule of Stalinist hermeneutics", that is: "the more 'harmony' is celebrated, the more chaos and antagonism

there is in reality” ...[and that it contains] the terrible power of the state and the helplessness of the ordinary citizen.’<sup>48</sup>

Such a political reading of Burtynsky’s and Kander’s work, in particular the implied human rights issues within China, again can be placed within the existing Western idea of China. To borrow the photography writer David Campany’s (2010) words:

*It almost goes without saying that current art and media representation of China is dominated by epic images...These are the motifs by which contemporary China is known, combined mentally with representable scenes of human rights violations. To be sure, the epic has a long and complex history in the depiction of China. It was dominant in propaganda of the Mao era with its massed ranks, inhuman heroes and impersonal service to the nation. While that chapter has passed, its visual template persists in the global imagination. The current preference for the epic is in many ways a retooling of that communist aesthetic for the capitalist era.*<sup>49</sup>

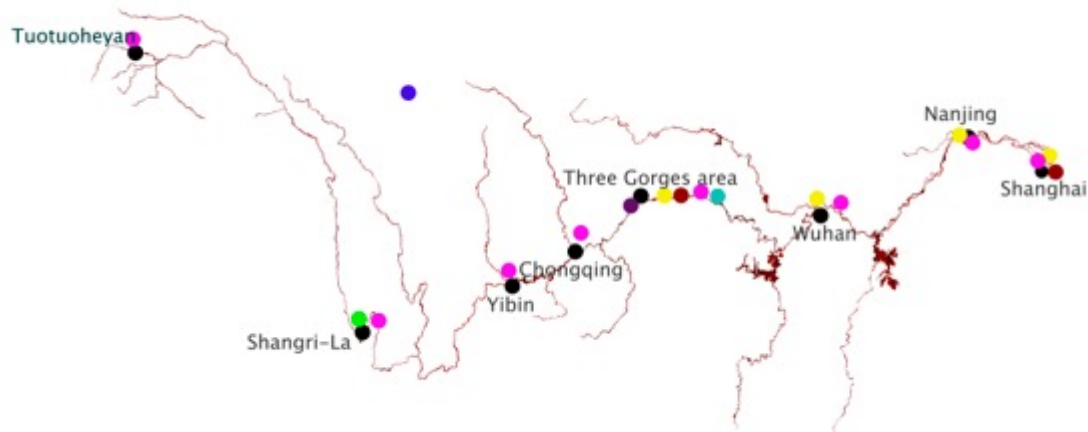
Campany’s text agrees with the Chinese photography critic Gu Zheng’s comment, in which a stereotype of China already exists in Western readers’ minds. Works from Burtynsky and Kander confirm, instead of challenge, this prejudice. Here, some deeper questions to ask include: In what context is criticality located? Given photographers’ cross-cultural activities, are they always responsible for checking their own pre-existing ideas, even when such ideas also appear ‘critical’ in a certain context? For example, China’s lack of a Western-style democratic system is commonly criticised in the West while even China’s environmental issues can be extended to its apparent lack of human rights. Is it a photographer’s responsibility to simply confirm this idea when creating work about China and disseminating work in the West? Or is it the photographer’s responsibility to be at least aware that complexities may exist beyond these prevailing ideas?

In one way, it is very difficult to change or even influence external context. In this research, my cultural position means that I am aware of two systems of pre-existing ideas. They are held by Chinese and non-Chinese people, including artists and critics, often with conflicting aspects. Although my aim is to challenge the Mother River myth within Chinese audiences, I



am also aware that a critical comment on China does not have to only confirm what the West already knows – western readers will also form an important part of my audience pool.

## Chapter conclusion



Map 4 A map showing the different areas covered by the Yangtze photographers reviewed in this chapter.



To combine contemporary Chinese and non-Chinese photographers' work on the Yangtze River, several common trends can be seen. As a subject matter, the Yangtze has been mourned

as a lost homeland by local Chinese photographers. They understand the Yangtze's national significance; however, their relationship to the Yangtze is not a mythical one. The Yangtze is both a physical and spiritual home to them. To place the Yangtze in a wider context, it is often seen as a victim of China's modernisation in which both humanity and the natural environment are disrupted by the country's 'progress'.

The content of most photographs is the political landscape: the new cities, the new dams and the new infrastructure. Such political landscapes concentrate on the urban and the iconic sites along the river, most of which have been frequently explored by previous photographers since John Thomson's era in the 1860s. The vernacular and the natural landscapes have not seen sufficient exploration. Meanwhile, large sections of the river, particularly the first 2,500 kilometres of the river within the Tibetan region, have received very little coverage.

The aesthetics employed by photographers vary. The traditional Shanshui continues to have a major influence on Chinese photographers. Although their effort to renew the tradition has been successful to a certain degree, many of their works have the underlying tendency to equalise Shanshui paintings with traditional Chinese landscape reality. In doing so, they criticise contemporary China with a mythic notion of traditional China in which human society existed in apparent harmony with nature.

Western photographers borrow aesthetics from their own traditions. The sublime is used to create a strong emotional effect; however, its interpretation tends to create a binary between elements – between nature and culture, or between humans and their (urban) environment. The topographic mode is also mobilised in which a distant observation and a critical distance are created. However, in both modes, the emphasis on scale is consistent. A 'natural vision', advocated by photographers such as Stephen Shore and other *New Topographics*

photographers, is lacking in all of the work by the photographers' discussed in this chapter.

The emphasis on aesthetics comes with a strong demonstration of a photographer's personal attitudes and a 'ready-made' meaning associated with existing aesthetics traditions. As a result, a more intellectual and cerebral reading of the pictures is difficult to achieve.

The content and aesthetics of the Yangtze photographers discussed in this chapter have largely presented the negative impact of China's modernisation. The relationships between the traditional and the modern, between humans and their environment, and between individuals and the state are often seen as opposites. What remains to be explored is the complexity that exists between and ultimately connects these elements. For example, the China Dream – China's modernisation ideology – has not seen a systematic, political and also complex exploration in a project with comparable depth achieved by Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects*, which critically challenges the myth of American Dream. Meanwhile, although the Yangtze River's iconic status is acknowledged in all works, the very nature of such status, that it is mythic, remains to be challenged. My practice-based research aims to contribute to this field of critical photography on the Yangtze River by 'filling' the various gaps.

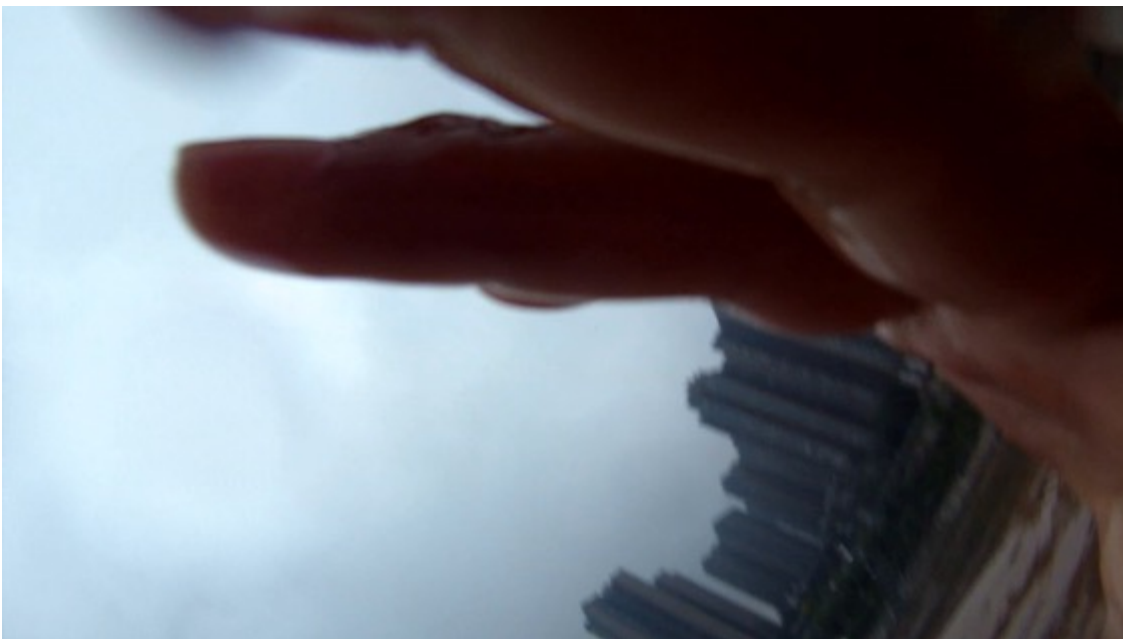
## Chapter IV

### From a Yangtze Photographer to a Yangtze Swimmer

#### The Changing Research Methods



**Doc 3 Yan – *Carving 127 Stones by a Yangtze tributary and leaving them in the river afterwards*. Duration: 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012 – ongoing.**



**Doc 4 Yong – *Swimming in the Yangtze*. Video still at 10 minutes 24 seconds from a film shot by an automatic, waterproof camera. 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012. Duration: 27 minutes 28 seconds.**

From this chapter onwards, this thesis will focus on my artistic practice within this PhD research. My eight field trips between 2010 and 2014 to the Yangtze River provided concentrated periods of producing artworks while the time between trips was spent on editing, reflection and contextual research. This chapter reviews my first four field trips, which happened in a progressive manner in the way that each field trip and its reflection would provide ideas for the practice in the following trips. The practice methods had a starting point but were constantly evolving, led by my responses towards the ongoing experiences.

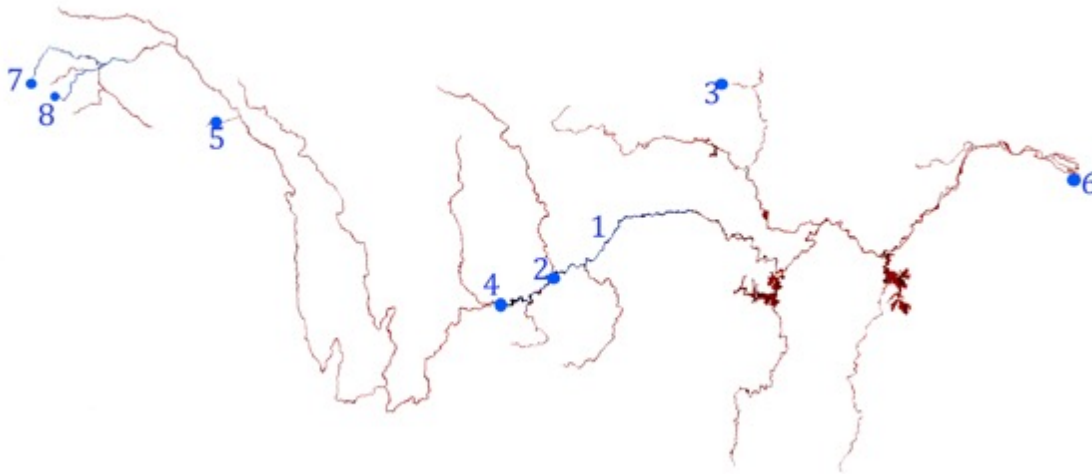
The overall purpose of the four field trips was to generate an original understanding of Yangtze The Mother River through personal experiences within the physical Yangtze environment. As a result, this period produced a crucial discovery that Yangtze The Mother River was mythic. Key characters of such a myth were exposed by the practice and accompanying theoretical research. The mythic Yangtze The Mother River subsequently became the target of subversion for the next phase of artistic practice, which will be reviewed in the next chapter.

Another important development that stemmed from these trips is a methodological one. Initially working as an observing photographer, I gradually became actively engaged in the Yangtze landscape by conducting physical and social interventions. This 'emplacement' within the research subject, in particular the tactile interventions and the power of thinking through the body, eventually became an important part of my claim to be making an original contribution to knowledge in the field of photographic research methods. Meanwhile, such in-depth and long-lasting experiential research clarified my personal relationship with Yangtze The Mother River, which became an important aspect in shaping my following photographic strategy.

This chapter is structured around the three types of engagement that I had with the Yangtze River.

- Type 1, a Yangtze photographer, refers to me working as a 'mapping' photographer who typically observes the landscape without actively interacting with it. However, this method alone quickly became insufficient because 'I could not see the river even when standing right next to it'.<sup>50</sup>
- Type 2, a Yangtze seeker. In this role, I took the mythic Yangtze landscapes to the level of personal identity, and embarked on a pilgrimage to find such landscapes. By allowing subjectivity, one unplanned and surprisingly powerful working method emerged – I began to actively interact with the physical landscapes.
- Type 3, a Yangtze swimmer. In this mode, I purposely abandoned all aesthetic and photographic intentions and simply indulged in the immersive experiences as a temporary Yangtze resident.

It is important to note that there was no division between these ways of working in real life. Often they happened simultaneously as an organic whole – I was simply working in the landscape, observing, doing things while talking to people. Throughout the whole process, I maintained my role as a photographer – my interaction with people was centred on me taking photos of them. My multisensory interventions were always designed and executed at sites selected for their specific landscape qualities. The new understanding gained in the process always helped to answer the question: how would I photograph the Yangtze River now that I know it in this new way?



**Map 5 Places that I visited during the first four field trips.**

During this period, I selected different places to visit according to their ‘types’. For example, there were the river source (7 and 8), river mouth (6) and the Three Gorges (1) as the iconic places; there was my hometown (3), a little-known small village at the edge of the Yangtze catchment as a vernacular place; there was Yushu (5), a Tibetan town located on the upper part of Jinsha River – the stretch of the Yangtze with no notable photographic visitors; and there was Chongqing (2), a fast-growing metropolis in the middle of the river.

### **Role I. A Yangtze photographer**

During the first and second field trips conducted in December 2010 and March 2011 respectively, I followed my artistic lineage as discussed in chapter II and took on the default role as a ‘mapping’ photographer – I was to keep a distance and to observe. This is not to say that other senses were not interacting with sight. Noise, air quality, temperature and the travelling experiences all formed a holistic experience. But sight was my main sense while landscape images were my intended output. At this stage, I was yet to establish fluid dialogues with the local Yangtze residents. Contextual research was just being initiated. My main information about the Yangtze was gained through observation and travelling experience.

In these two trips, I visited three representational places: the Three Gorges, my hometown Nanzhao (南召), and Chongqing. I experimented with two ways of shooting: to wander around while photographing what looked ‘interesting’; and to photograph with two trial mapping systems. Surprisingly, in every place I visited, I saw something different from my expectations. I was disappointed not to find the Mother River as seen in pictures. But I also began to realise that there would be a cause for the misalignment between the physical landscapes and my pre-existing ideas of them. Meanwhile, my adopted method as an observing, mapping photographer became seriously insufficient for the research to go further.

### **1. First impressions at the Three Gorges (Location 1 on Map 5): A misalignment between the real and the mythic landscapes**



DOC 5 Left: Tourists admiring the Three Gorges Dam model. (Note the picture on the wall behind them.) Right: Tourists at the Three Gorges Dam. November 2010.



DOC 6 Left: The ‘175 m’ mark at the Three Gorges Dam. Right: Rooftops of submerged villages. November 2010.



In November 2010 during my first field trip, the Three Gorges Dam was nearly completed and had already become a popular tourist destination. Here, the concrete mass manifested itself as a powerful political statement, reinforcing China's ideology of modernisation and its ability to tame this mighty river. And I experienced a painful 'culture shock'. On 28<sup>th</sup> November, I wrote the following in my diary:

*The Yangtze and the world next to it were nothing like what I imagined. It was constantly noisy, very dirty, very messy, massive construction sites were everywhere, massive transformation upon its natural and cultural environment was happening on a scale almost beyond imagination. There is nothing relevant to Taoism that I could see. It says that in contemporary China, material wealth is valued as more important than anything else. The extremely rich cultural heritage and outstanding natural beauty in the area were treated in the most brutal way: they were simply flooded and may never be regained. China is creating a new history that is not continuous from its past.*

Such text demonstrates clearly that I had many preconceived ideas of the Three Gorges landscapes, such as the area's natural beauty, cultural significance and China's Taoism ideal of harmony between humanity and nature manifested in Shanshui paintings. I also began to view nature and culture as binary opposites, and to blame China's modernisation as a destroyer of its history. Feeling completely disoriented, I walked around, unable to understand the landscapes in front of me. As a result, I produced few images, all of which focused on the scale of the landscape transformation.



Plate 2 Yan Wang Preston, *Wushan New Town (巫山新城)*, November 2010.



Plate 3 Yan Wang Preston, *Wushan New Town (巫山新城)*, November 2010.

## 2. The first trial mapping system: Five confluences (Location 1 on Map 5):

Frustrated by my apparent inability to 'see', I experimented with a trial mapping method: to photograph five confluences where a tributary joins the Yangtze. The visual rule was to shoot with the tributary as the foreground and the Yangtze as the background. However, I felt 'blind' when taking and looking at these pictures. Somehow I refused to consider them as formal work, even when they possess visual appeal. This raised the crucial question of what I was looking for with this method of shooting. If 'objectivity' was my intention, then the images could be accepted as satisfying results. Rejecting 'blind' shooting demonstrated my intention to understand more. But more of what? History? Geology? Or the relationship between me and the Yangtze? At the time I had no answer to these questions.



Plate 4 Yang Wang Preston, *Confluence 5 – Qingjiang (清江) and the Yangtze River*, November 2010.

### **3. My hometown Nanzhao (location 3 on Map 5): Potential in the vernacular landscape**

My hometown, Dongdian (董店村) in Nanzhao County, Henan Province, is a small and poor village. Huangya River (黄鸭河, The Yellow Duck River) in this village is a small tributary of Han River (汉江), which joins the Yangtze at Wuhan. I was intensely familiar with this type of place because I grew up there. But the question was, why are landscapes like these not considered part of the Mother River image? My father had proudly left the village and entered a medical university in Henan's capital city. My whole family now live in Beijing. Why did we all try to leave the rural for the urban? Why is there such a hierarchy between the urban and the rural, or between the landscapes of the Three Gorges and Dongdian? My subsequent research (see chapter I) discovered that the formation of such hierarchies is a long, complex, historical and political process. In the context of China's modernisation, it can be an ideological one, in which industrialisation and urbanisation were given priority in order to develop the country. I began to see these vernacular landscapes as a potential part of the Mother River image. But to do so was to radically change some of the hierarchies that I had accepted throughout my life in China. And it would represent a river radically different from the mythic Mother River. But in December 2010, I was yet to fully realise the importance of such vernacular landscapes in my research.





**DOC 7 Nanzhao, Hometown Village, November 2010.**



**DOC 8 Nanzhao, Hometown Village, November 2010.**

#### **4. Chongqing (location 2 on Map 5): First impressions**

During the journey through the Three Gorges, I was a transient traveller. In order to have sustained engagement with a particular locality and to gain insights of a place, I spent one month in Chongqing in March 2011 as a resident artist. Chongqing was also chosen for more reasons: as the newest municipal city in China, Chongqing has become synonymous with China's large-scale urban expansion.<sup>51</sup> It could therefore be a good case study for such issues along the Yangtze River.

Initially, I experienced a culture shock in Chongqing. The intensity of the city landscape created a strong sense of disorientation, confusion, even denial. Visually, the Yangtze landscape here appeared unimpressive – a flat river dwarfed by the city. Unable to understand the landscapes here, I decided to 'follow my eyes' – to wander around in the city and photograph whatever caught my attention. Slowly, a theme began to appear. I was often photographing the new apartment blocks and the urban forests. Impatient to wait for young trees to grow, the local government, institutions and property developers of Chongqing was buying mature trees and 'manufacturing' their ready-made forests. I gave the series a working title of *Forest*.<sup>52</sup>

Although *Forest* successfully expressed my feeling of confrontation in the city at the time and raised questions about its sustainable development, I was going too far away from my initial focus on the Yangtze River. So I decided to conduct another trial mapping project.





Plate 5 Yan Wang Preston. *Forest*, Chongqing, China, March 2011.



Plate 6 Yan Wang Preston. *Forest*, Chongqing, China, March 2011.





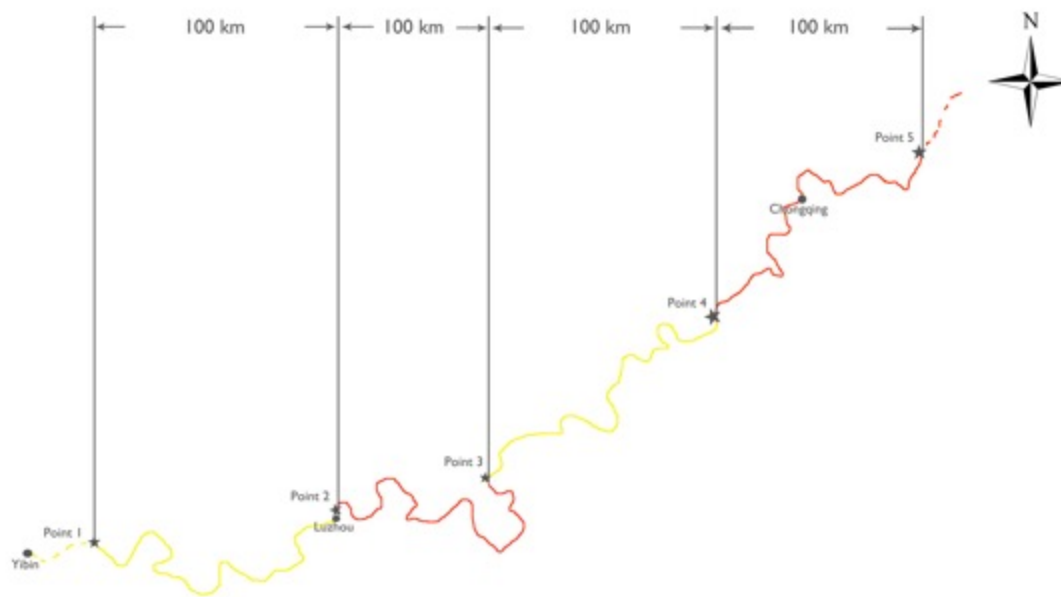
Plate 7 Yan Wang Preston. *Forest*, Chongqing, China, March 2011.



Plate 8 Yan Wang Preston. *Forest*, Chongqing, China, March 2011.



## 5. A trial Point System



Map 6 The trial Point System map. Point 1 was close to the city of Yibin, which is location 4 on Map 5.



DOC 9 Trial Point 1 GPS: 28.48'400"N, 104.52'322"E Altitude: 265 ft. 24 March 2011.

For the trial Point System, I photographed five locations on the river near Chongqing at 100-kilometre intervals. Full of anticipation to find the Mother River, I actually experienced a 'heart-breaking' journey. The first location, Trial Point 1, was particularly telling. Located near Yibin (宜宾, approximately 400 kilometres upstream from Chongqing), this semi-rural location was the site of a new industrial park. The island shown on my Google Earth maps was now an ugly hole due to illegal sand dredging. Choking red sewage was discharged directly into the river. Out of desperation, I wrote the following in my diary:

*I am deeply saddened by this view. The concept of a river in my mind is so different from reality, and this has been proven again and again during my journey along 1000 kilometres of this river. I fear that all my points will fall on locations like this. I am not even sure if it's worth going on.*

My fear was indeed turned into reality for the next four Trial Points. As a result, by the end of March 2011, I was temporarily lost without a direction. During the last two trips, I had tried different ways of photographing the Yangtze River landscapes. However, all I could see was destruction, pollution and cities expanding with seemingly uncontrollable and unsustainable ambitions. There seemed to be a shield between me and the river in my mind, and between me and the river in reality. Meanwhile, I felt a strong, personal loss. Why was I almost in tears when facing a bit of sewage water in the Yangtze River?

It was then necessary to review my personal relationship with the river. The familiar stories, celebrated sites and landscape representations of the Yangtze have made the river an icon for China's national identity. National identity is an intrinsic part of personal identity: 'Without a sense of national identification the modern subject would experience a deep sense of subjective loss' (Hall, 1992: 291). I had never lived next to the river. Yangtze The Mother River, the symbol and icon of my 'motherland', existed solely in representations. And I had taken on a national icon as part of my personal identity.

But thousands of tourists could still see images that matched their expectations at certain sites. Why did I 'suddenly' begin to notice other things? 'Geographical dislocation or cultural change can disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of seeing, opening a space for more critical reflection on what is seen' (Cosgrove, 2002: 251). It was possible that my five-year absence from China had become an eye-opener, helping me to notice the common landscapes that were too familiar to be seen before my migration. To reference back to Stephen Shore's *Uncommon Places*, I really *saw* the banal and realised that they were as 'Chinese' as the Kuimen image printed on the RMB10 note (Ref 14).

**The effect of this geographical dislocation was enlarged by my new life in the UK, which was an age of 'critical awakening' for me. Living in post-industrial North England, I began questioning the long-term prospects of China's current development and to potentially place it in a wider historical and international context. The Green ideas, and environmental and conservational concerns prevailing in the UK increased my awareness of these issues. I learned to observe the landscapes with a critical eye. Meanwhile, with the works of Edward Burtynsky, Nadav Kander and Yang Yongliang, I was seeing the Yangtze River and Chinese landscapes as an environmental crisis**

Part III: Critical contemporary foreign Yangtze photographers (139) (122).

Such personal historicity suggests that I had been influenced by two types of Yangtze River representation: the Chinese mainstream representation of a mythic Mother River and contemporary critical photography with environmental concerns as the primary topic. The Chinese mainstream images are produced in line with China's modernisation ideology, while the critical photography from both China and the West questions such ideology.

Sight is a highly selected act, affected completely by what we know consciously and subconsciously. That I could not *see* the Yangtze River even when standing next to it powerfully demonstrates that it was the mythic Mother River that I was looking for. That I could only see the landscapes as 'destruction' and 'pollution' demonstrates the influence that I received from contemporary critical photography of the Yangtze River. I had been 'primed' by representations of the river. I needed to go beyond such representations and to find my own river.

After being away for five years, the Yangtze landscapes suddenly became 'unfamiliar' to me. Within this unfamiliarity, it was mostly the colossal scales (in comparison to UK landscapes) of the political landscapes that drew my initial attention. As political landscapes, they are designed to imply (ideological) visions and are more visible (Jackson, 1984). Both unfamiliar and more visible, they can be obvious photographic targets. They were what I saw during these early trips.

I refused to photograph any more if the only thing in my vision was environmental crisis and destruction. This decision indicates that, even at the early stage, I wanted to go further than the first impression, to seek complexity instead of a simple binary opposition. This could be

explained as a personal desire. I *needed* to feel at home in China. And China in my memory was not just destruction; rather, it could also be explained by a certain sensibility, shaped with the help of some photographers' work, such as Sternfeld (79) and Southam (85). I knew there was more in the landscapes. The question was how to gain access to it.

## **6. Living experiences in Chongqing (location 2 on Map 5):**

Although the role of a transient, observing photographer produced less satisfying results, another type of experience began to emerge. While in Chongqing, I could stroll at the riverbank daily. This was a slow, leisurely process with an open-minded approach. I simply wanted to become part of the river community. Slowly, a fuller picture rolled out. There were tadpoles in the shallow water, fish swimming and swallows flying. Although nothing was spectacular in a visual sense, there was an ecosystem in place, booming with the energy of early spring. The river slowly appeared less 'boring'. I had time to relax and automatically renewed a childhood hobby: to collect river stones. This process was liberating. It brought out a lot of memories of living in China and made me feel temporarily at home again. The weight and temperature of the stones signalled to me their unquestionable existence: 'The real, ultimately, is that which offers resistance' (Tuan, 2004: 78). Meanwhile, river stones have rich meanings in Chinese traditional culture, symbolising the gentle but persistent power of water. The confirmed existence of the river stones was therefore extended into the confirmed existence of the river itself. But it was not a pictorial river. Rather, it was the river's flow and power that were manifested in the smooth shape of the stones.

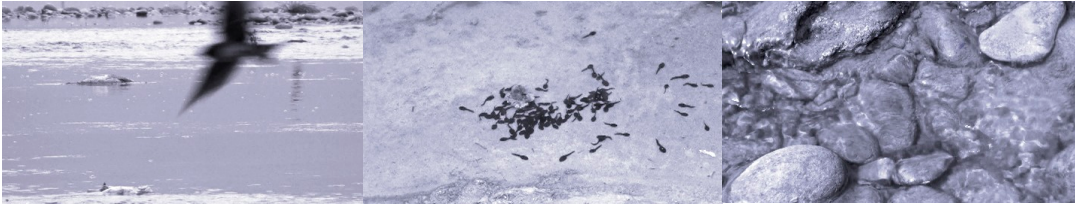
I realised that playing with stones could lead to something deeper, for example a symbolic connection with the river. I tested the idea of using stones as potential art materials by simply displaying some at the work-in-progress exhibition for the residency. It was interesting to observe that visitors were happily playing with them. Later on, school children who visited

the exhibition painted some of them – an enduring folk tradition of painting river stones. Like me, they also connected to the stones instantly.

My time at the river slowly presented a much fuller human life too. Bulldozers were of course never far away. Small patches of the old town, farms and ponds were being transformed into a new city. But life went on. Families and lovers played happily. Numerous fishermen sat calmly. One of their favourite spots was at a pool of warm water – the water was the heated discharge from a nearby coal-fired power plant. The fishermen were confident that the treated discharge was clean enough and that the fish they caught was perfectly edible. A particularly telling story was about the vegetable farmers. Every summer, the rising Yangtze water would submerge their farms. Yet they returned year after year because the fertile land is very productive and gives them a good living that is hard to resist.



**DOC 10** The installation view and visitors at the work-in-progress exhibition in Chongqing. April 2011.



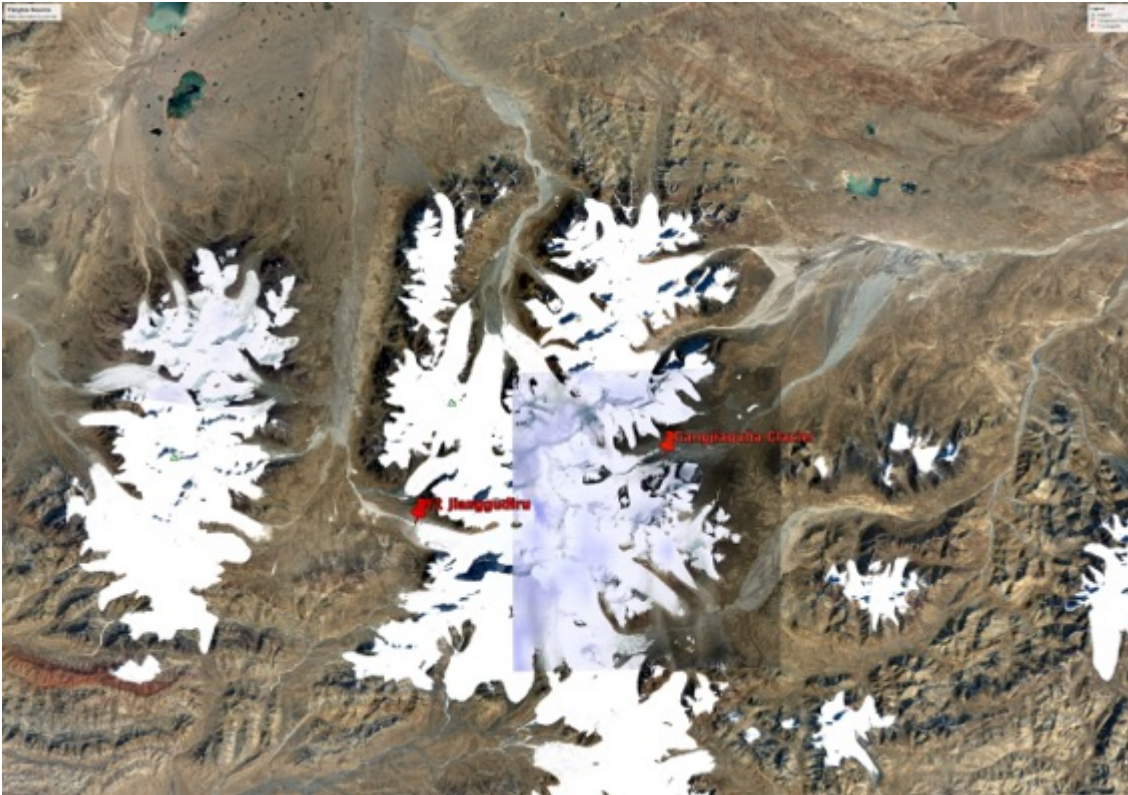
**DOC 11 Film stills from the three-screen installation at the Chongqing exhibition, featuring flying swallows, tadpoles and flowing water. April 2011.**



## **Role II: A Yangtze seeker**

This multilayered river life began to ease the tension between 'nature' and 'culture' that I felt during the first trip. The Yangtze was becoming more real than a picture. But at this stage, I still held on to the Mother River image that I went back to China for. I suspected that the intense city landscapes might be a distraction. So I decided to have an expedition to the river source, hoping to find it in its 'pure' form. To 'find myself' through finding landscapes fitting for the mythic Mother River had become an urgent task. My subjectivity and personal desire was now leading the project towards a detour. I became a Yangtze seeker. In this state, I am similar to Chinese artists such as Xiao Xuan'an and Yan Changjiang (124). The transformation of the Yangtze landscapes is seen as a personal loss while the Yangtze River's iconic status is embedded in personal identities.

## 1. The river source (locations 7 and 8 on Map 5)



Map 7 A Google Earth map showing the area of Mt. Geladandong, 6,621 m. The lower left mark is Jianggudiru Glacier. The upper right one is Gangjiaquba Glacier.



DOC 12 The high plateau on the way to Jianggudiru Glacier, the official source of the Yangtze River. We slept in the vehicle that night. 14 November 2011, 5,000 m above sea level.



DOC 13 Approaching Gangjiaquba Glacier, a source glacier for the Yangtze. 19 November 2011 5,300 m above sea level.



DOC 14 Clockwise: Life inside a Land Cruiser; at the monument for the source of the Yangtze River, 5,400 metres above the sea level; approaching Gangjiaquba Glacier; my Tibetan guide for the Yangtze source. November 2011.





**DOC 15** Left: A Tibetan couple living in the valley leading to Jianggudiru Glacier. Right: A Tibetan man living a few kilometres away from Gangjiaquba Glacier with his sheep. The source of the Yangtze area is the homeland of these Tibetans. It is not a 'pristine' wilderness. November 2011.



**Plate 9** Yan Wang Preston, *The River Source*. From *Mother River* series (2010–2014).

The Yangtze has many sources. The 'official' source identified by the Chinese government is the Jianggudiru Glacier on the south-west side of Mt. Geladandong (6,621 m). Located in one of the most remote areas on the central Tibetan Plateau, it is 255 kilometres away from the nearest tarmac road and thousands of kilometres away from any reliable rescue. It would be a

serious expedition, requiring thorough preparation and experience in dealing with extreme low temperatures, high altitudes, off-road expedition driving, and wilderness survival. I would need to use all my skills in mountaineering, medicine and photography to make the trip.

While preparing for the expedition, I only had two vague plans: to see the landscape at the river source; and, perhaps, to do something with it. I was still deeply haunted by the pollution and destruction seen on previous trips. Before the trip, I acquired some red mineral pigment from a Tibetan painting workshop. I hoped that this organic material would be less intrusive to the Tibetan landscape and might pay some homage to the local culture. But I did not know exactly what to do with it. Previous experiences told me that while travelling in Tibet, one must work with the weather and terrain without forcing too many preconceived ideas. It would be a journey into the unknown.

Having taken a whole week to get there, on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011, I reached Jianggudiru Glacier with two drivers and a local guide. The physical conditions were severe: it was 5,400 metres above sea level and minus 30 degrees. I had severe headaches and had to take extra oxygen in order to 'function properly'. But a fresh snowfall 'purified' the landscape and presented a view perfectly fitting as the source of the Mother River. I was so 'satisfied' that I made only one composition at this location.

I was consciously aware that it was a purified view, demonstrating the broadness and purity of the landscape at the source of the Yangtze. It was made possible due to a particular weather condition and exists only as a photographic image. It is not fundamentally different from the picture taken by Sui Ruchu in 1976 (Ref 12). The nearest Tibetan settlement is only a few kilometres away. From our broken conversations with the local residents, we learned that even in this remote place, overgrazing was becoming a problem. To manage and distribute the

land between the local Tibetans, fences have been put up that are affecting the wildlife's movements. The river water was too high in mineral content and not suitable for drinking. Small streams on the grassland were contaminated with a horrible hydatid disease, spread by animal droppings. My photograph reflected none of these elements. It was made to satisfy my need to find the Mother River.

We left Jianggudiru Glacier quickly, due to the fear of being stranded by heavy snow. A few days later, we drove to Gangjiaquba Glacier on the east side of Mt. Geladandong. There was no fresh snow on this side and it was much warmer. There was a visible dirt track leading almost all the way to the glacier and I was totally acclimatised by then. We found an abandoned house and settled in. And I set off to find a view to 'do something with'.

And this was a view with particular aesthetic qualities. I wanted to find a site with the magnificent snow mountain and glacier as the background, and the frozen Yangtze headwater in the foreground – a view fitting for an image of the source of The Mother River. My previous frustration of being unable to 'see' the river and my experience of playing with stones in Chongqing made me want to touch the river. Initially, I decided to use river stones again – to hold them in my hands. To make a landscape photograph out of the actions, I arranged the stones into the shape of a circle. Although megalithic stone circles have rich cultural implications in the UK and have been often referenced by some artists' work, I was employing the shape of a circle as a Chinese symbol,<sup>53</sup> where a circle symbolises the world as an interconnected whole, and each part is connected to the centre at equal distances. By choosing this shape, I was referencing an ideal embedded in Shanshui paintings.

I then decided to make a red circle on the river. This would be direct, skin-to-skin contact with the water in its solid form. That evening I wrote:

*November 19th 2011*

*I am so tired today. But I'm also so deeply happy. I realised my dream of making the hand-drawn, red circle at the very source of the Yangtze, right in front of the glacier. I touched the ice, and the blood-coloured mineral already started its journey minutes after the completion of the circle. My hands are very rough now.*

However, I was aware that such a vision was overly simplistic, even romantic. On 5<sup>th</sup>

December I returned to Chongqing and performed the ritual of holding river stones with the intense city landscape as the backdrop. I named the serial work *Yuan*. There are many Chinese characters with this pronunciation, for example 圆, which means *circle*; 源, which means *water source*; or 原, which means *origin*.

At this time, my interventions in the landscapes were very much driven by a personal desire to find and to connect with the Mother River. I had chosen landscapes from two extremes: the pristine nature at the source, and the intense city landscape in Chongqing. However, I had begun to consciously compare them. Holding stones within the two different landscapes helped me to somehow connect them and to 'reconcile' the apparent binary relations between them. The river connects us all. But in what aspects exactly did the river connect? This question would have to be answered while the research progressed.



Yuan – The Source

## A circle of 127 Yangtze River stones

each stone was held in my hands for 10 seconds

Date: 19th November 2011

Location: Gangjiaquba Glacier at Mt. Geladandong (6,621 m), a source glacier of the Yangtze River. Tibetan Plateau, Qinghai Province, China

GPS: 33°28'08.79' N 91°12'44.02'E

Altitude: 5,340 metres above sea level

Duration: Approximately 40 minutes

Circle diameter: 38 of my small steps

Materials: 127 Yangtze River stones, my hands, the frozen Yangtze River



Plate 10 Yan Wang Preston, *Yuan – A Stone Circle*, 19 December 2011.

Yuan – The Source

A red hand-drawn circle

Date: 19th November 2011

Location: Gangjiaquba Glacier at Mt. Geladandong (6,621 m), a source glacier of the Yangtze River. Tibetan Plateau, Qinghai Province, China

GPS: 33°28'08.79' N 91°12'44.02'E

Altitude: 5,340 metres above sea level

Duration: Too excited to remember

Circle diameter: 38 of my small steps

Materials: Red rock pigment (for Thangka painting), my hands, the frozen Yangtze River



Plate 11 Yan Wang Preston, *Yuan – A Red Circle*, 19 December 2011.



**DOC 16 *Making the Red Circle*, 19 December 2011.**



**Plate 12 Yan Wang Preston, *Details of the Red Circle*, 19 December 2011. Notice the crack on the ice – the shape would be used for my next work.**

Yuan – The Source

## A circle of 127 Yangtze River stones

each stone was held in my hands for 10 seconds



Date: 5th December 2011

Location: Linjiangmen, Chongqing, China (3,700 km from the river source)

GPS: 29°33'47.89'N 106°34'11.59'E

Altitude: 250 metres above sea level

Duration: 31 minutes 54 seconds

Circle diameter: 38 of my small steps

Materials: 127 Yangtze River stones, my hands, Kuixinglou Public Square, downtown Chongqing



Plate 13 Yan Wang Preston, *Yuan – A Stone Circle*, 5 December 2011.



## 2. Yushu (玉树, location 5 on Map 5)

With the expedition to the river source, I did find a pristine landscape fitting for the mythic Mother River image; I also managed to touch the river by painting on its frozen 'body'. But I was acutely aware that such images were fully constructed and did not reflect any of the environmental, cultural or political complexity embedded in the locality. My photographs and actions had the potential to re-enforce the binary relationship between nature and culture, and tradition and modern that exists in many photographers' work. Meanwhile, my experience at the river source was brief. The Tibetan Plateau, as the traditional borderland and the modernisation 'frontier' of China, needed to be explored further.

I chose Yushu in Qinghai Province as my next destination. Situated between the river source and the Great Bend in Lijiang, this 2,000-kilometre stretch of the river with Yushu in the middle remains a 'gap' in the representation of the Yangtze River. A small river, Batang (巴塘河), flows through Yushu town centre and joins Tongtian River (the name of the Yangtze in this region) 50 kilometres away.<sup>54</sup> Combining my experiences in Chongqing and at the river source, I wanted to explore Yushu in as complex and holistic way as possible, so I planned the trip around a process-based action instead of pure observation. To compare with the action of intimacy and care, such as holding naturally shaped stones, I would carry out an action of 'destruction' and 'transformation' by carving quarried stones. Yushu is a religious centre in Tibet, housing the largest mani stone piles in the world – there are reputedly two billion mani stones!<sup>55</sup> Carving stones in this context was my way to pay tribute to the Tibetan religion. But I am not religious. So I would carve the shape of an ice crack, which appeared in the red circle that I made at the river source (Plate 12).

Meanwhile, I wanted to continue my investigation of some Taoism ideals that were held by me and celebrated in many contemporary photographic works. After using circles as a Taoist symbol in *Yuan*, I hoped to test out the Taoist idea of 'doing nothing', which was seen by

Zhuang Zi as the ultimate way of being part of nature. I saw the carving process as a way of 'doing nothing', since the act itself does not have any practical purpose. To imply the symbolic embodiment with the Yangtze environment, I would name the work 'Yan', which is my Chinese name meaning 'rock'. I would place all the carved stones in the river.

Having never carved anything before, my plan was to learn the traditional techniques from the locals as well as to purchase all necessary materials and tools from them. In this way, I hoped to temporarily 'integrate' myself with the local community. How would the physical landscape be perceived within and after this process? That was to be found out.



**DOC 17 First impression of Yushu. The mani stone piles are visible behind the white towers. August 2012.**



DOC 18 Jiegu Town, (结古镇) Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, August 2012. (Notice the mani stone piles in the top right corner.)



DOC 19 Left: Me talking to the locals at Yushu about the carving idea. Right: Choosing stone materials.<sup>56</sup>



DOC 20 Left: Me being trained by a local Tibetan in how to carve stones using traditional techniques. Right: First step was to paint the stones. A local girl volunteered to help.





**DOC 21 Left: Testing the pigment in the water. Right: Talking to a local monk about the ritual of laying mani stones in rivers.**



**DOC 22 Left: A clear stream in a nearby quiet valley as one option for the carving location. Right: Tongtian River as another option for the carving location. Both options were rejected.**



**DOC 23 My chosen location for the carving process – by Batang River in Jiegu Town, Yushu.**



**DOC 24 My chosen location for the carving process – by Batang River in Jiegu Town, Yushu. View from the side. (The small figure on the left side of the river is me.)**

## Yan – The Stones

127 stones carved by me and being touched by the  
Yangtze River, hopefully forever

Starting Date: 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012

Location: Batang River, 50 kilometres away from its confluence with the Yangtze River, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China (1,000 km from the river source)

Altitude: 3,300 metres above sea level

Duration: Hopefully for ever

Materials: 127 stones, red pigment, one hammer, two gloves, three chisels, various other tools, the noise and dust, the Batang River and the Yangtze River, Yushu, and me



**Plate 14** Yan Wang Preston, *Yan – Carving 127 Stones and Leaving them in the Yangtze River*. 5 August 2012–an indefinite date.





DOC 25 Me carving the stones. 10 August 2012.



Plate 15 Yan Wang Preston Yan – *Carving 127 Stones and Leaving them in the Yangtze River*. 12 August 2012.





Plate 16 Yan Wang Preston *A Tibetan family at Yushu. My suppliers for the stone carving materials.* 13 August 2012.



Plate 17 Yan Wang Preston, *Yushu*, 13 August 2012.

I chose a busy spot on Batang River to do the carving. This location choice was significantly different from *Yuan*. I had in fact explored the relatively quiet Tongtian River 50 kilometres away from the town, as well as some nearby valleys with more 'pristine' landscapes and clear running streams. Compared with the iconic landscapes that I chose for *Yuan*, this nameless location in Yushu was a crucial step on my way to accepting such vernacular landscapes in the concept of The Mother River.

Through the process of learning to carve, negotiating prices and transporting materials, I did manage to engage with the local communities. Sitting on a tiny stool for a week while carving with a small hammer and chisel (all bought from the locals), my whole body was screaming with pain. Thinking with my body brought some unexpected learnings.

My action *Yan* in Yushu was a direct continuation and subversion of *Yuan* at the Yangtze source and in Chongqing. They were driven by the same personal desire to find the Mother River. The ways of searching were extended from observation to tactile and social interactions. In this action, it was the process of art-making that became the main source of research data. In *Yan*, it was impossible to separate the eye from the body, the body from the mind, or an objective observation from a subjective experience. This process made me understand the carving as an action full of contradictions, for example between a poetic devotion to the river and the actual hammering of quarried stones; between the art-intended action and its completely vernacular environment; and between the carved stones' envisioned permanent engagement of the river and their uncertain future threatened by the nearby bulldozers.

Through *Yan*, I discovered that local Tibetan life is simply as rich and complicated as anyone else's normal lives. They are smart business people with strong impulses to make money. They were carving mani stones for sale and made good money from tutoring me. The whole

town was saturated with family workshops, where children work with their parents in unhealthy and unsafe environments. Machinery has replaced hand-carving techniques for efficiency, and synthetic paints have replaced traditional mineral pigments for cost-saving purposes. While many still lived in temporary accommodation due to the severe earthquake in 2010, life and fun continued. Children played house with recycled bottles (Plate 17) while goats fought on sand pits. Families were concerned about their children's education and their own welfare. The teenage girl wearing an Apple cap in Plate 16 took pride in having spent time in schools near Beijing as part of the rescue action after the earthquake.

Tibet is often perceived with a mysterious religious atmosphere. Religion was still an important part of local life in Yushu; however, younger generations were participating much less. Mani stones and prayer flags were familiar sights at the river, but very few people were seen. Most people I talked to about the nearby Tongtian River had never been to it, nor did they care. A local monk confirmed to me that they did throw mani stones in the river in order to symbolically 'build a bridge' for the dead people's souls to go across the river on their way to ascend to heaven. Then some teenagers considered this 'superstition' instead of 'religion'. Such experiences helped to lift the mythic veil of Tibet, and this time I took pictures to reflect the stories (Plate 14, 16 and 17).

The 'inappropriateness' of *Yan* led me to question whether the goal of my search at the time, The Mother River, was actually there. The doubts were amplified by information gained from the local residents, for whom there was no such thing as a Mother River. Similarly, during my search since 2010, I had not been able to find landscapes similar to the Mother River images that I went to China for. My hands have felt the river's existence, but it was the existence of its flow and power, instead of its images. By the end of the Yushu field trip, I suddenly suspected **that Yangtze The Mother River did not exist in real life. Perhaps it was a myth?!**



### Role III: A Yangtze swimmer

#### 1. Wusongkou (吴淞口) – The river mouth (location 6 on Map 5)



DOC 26 Wusongkou (3), Shanghai, China, 18 August 2012.



DOC 27 Dipping my feet into the river. Wusongkou, the mouth of the Yangtze, Shanghai. Still image from a mobile phone film. 18 August 2012.

Having left Yushu, I briefly visited Wusongkou in Shanghai where the last major tributary of the Yangtze, Huangpu River, joins. Wusongkou is conventionally seen as the mouth of the Yangtze River and is a familiar place to me. During my eight-year residence in Shanghai, I had caught the local bus to visit this place many times. However, this time around, I was struck by its complete banality, something that I never ‘registered’ in relation to The Mother River in my previous visits.

Enjoying the cool river water washing my bare feet while drinking a cup of soya milk – my ‘default’ action at Wusongkou on the many previous visits – I had temporarily returned to the state of an ordinary Yangtze resident. I pondered upon the question: how should I understand this moment and this landscape in the concept of Yangtze The Mother River? Clearly, I was no longer in shock as I was during the first visit to the Three Gorges Dam. I was beginning to accept that the banality and vernacularity were part of the Yangtze stories. But it was the next action that brought the ‘eureka’ moment in this research.

## **2. Chongqing again**

In August 2012, after my trip to Yushu and Shanghai, I returned to Chongqing and conducted the ultimate ‘embodiment’: swimming in the river. To ensure my safety, I found three local swimmers to be my guides, who go swimming daily at an industrial port named Jianshe Matou (建设码头).<sup>57</sup> This is a messy place. A glass factory ships products from there, making walking in the water potentially dangerous. The docking ships could generate deadly current to ‘suck’ the swimmers in. The water appeared very murky with foam. (Apparently, it was the silt, not dirt, that caused the red colour.<sup>58</sup>) Some sewage channels opened out to the river. Fragments of rubbish floated around. But the swimmers were not concerned. They believed that the huge flow would dilute the dirt and flush it away. And their health was proof of the reasonable water quality. I believed in them. To swim in the Yangtze was great fun! After three days’

practice, I managed to swim one more time with a waterproof camera mounted on my headband, just before the water level rose too high to swim any more. The camera dutifully recorded what was in front of me during the entire swimming course: an unmediated view of the urban landscape as seen from a flowing river.



## Yong – The Swimming

Date: 1<sup>st</sup> September 2012

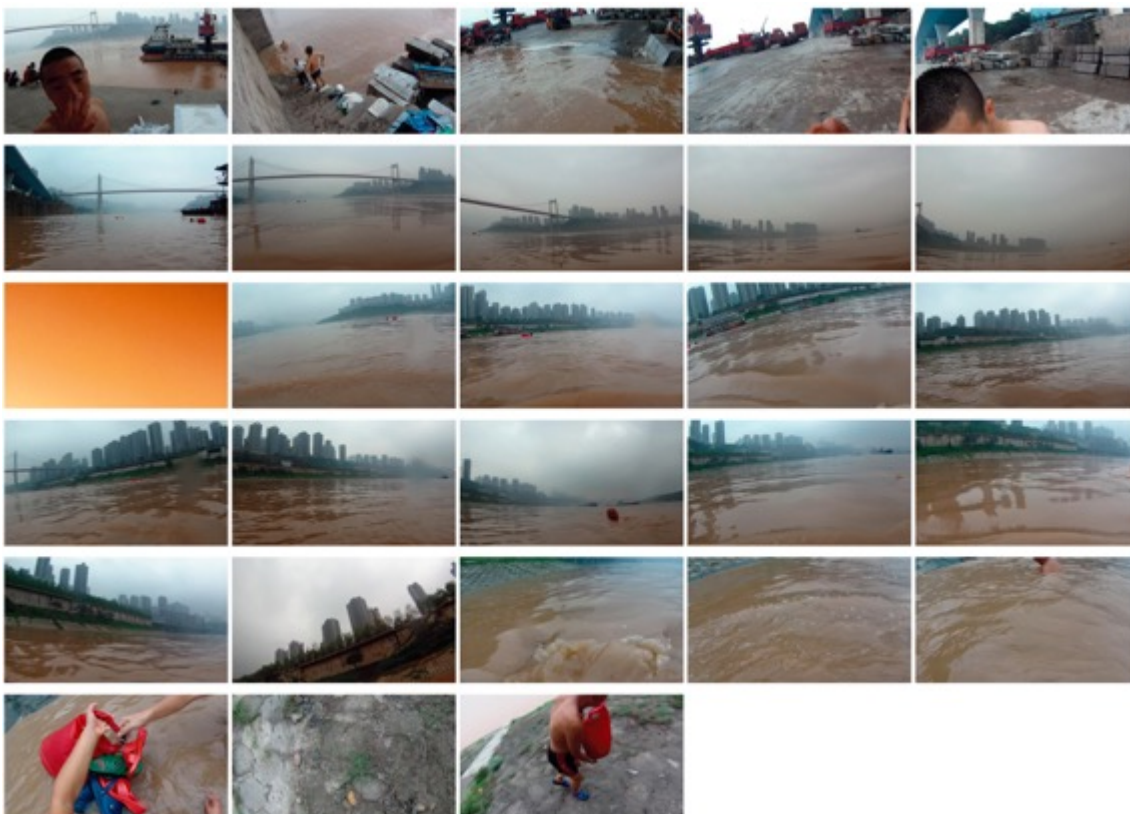
Departure location: Jianshe Port, Jiulongpo District, Chongqing, China (3,700 km from the river source)

Distance: Approximately 2 kilometres

Duration: 00;27;42;02 (0 hours 27 minutes 42 seconds and 2 frames)

Materials: My body, the Yangtze River, and the city along the river

Videoed by: A waterproof, self-recording camera mounted on my headband



DOC 28 Screen shots from the 16th second and 11th frame of each minute within the 28-minute video of *Yong – Swimming*. (Sequence: left to right).

‘Thinking with my body’ reached its climax in the swimming process. The water surrounded my entire body, touching it, floating it, pushing it forward and threatening it with its powerful flow and current. In this process, I had most definitely found the ‘real’ Yangtze. From touching the river stones, the serial multisensory embodiment with the Yangtze finally brought my search for the Mother River to a solid result. **The river is still there. However, it is *not* the one existing only in those mythical landscape images, songs and poems. This is a real river with its unstoppable forces and its vernacular landscapes, filled with my bodily memories.**

Such discovery reveals the limit of sight. Certain aspects of the land simply cannot be accessed by it. The river in Chongqing looks quiet, flat and unimpressive. But the power of its flow can best be felt by one’s skin. For a landscape photographer whose typical role is an observer, such full-body engagement could generate surprising results.

The forces of the river can be understood in different ways. For me, it is about the river’s relative eternity, the concept of geological time or a wider historical context. Contemporary China, with its rapid landscape transformation, could be considered as simply one chapter within this historical frame instead of a break from history. This understanding finally subverted my earlier impressions of the urban landscape in China and my perceived irreconcilable conflicts between culture and modernity and nature and tradition. This immersive experience of the river can be compared with Müller-Pohle’s *The Danube River Project* that I discussed in chapter II (95). The difference is that my body replaced the camera, which in turn brought vital and personal information that cannot be gained using any other method.

The swimming experience helped me to accept the less-than-ideal landscape at Jianshe Matou as part of the Yangtze River landscape. My memories enriched the messy and vernacular site

with meanings of significance. At the same time, I reached an understanding towards all the other 'disappointing' landscapes that I had denied during previous field trips. **It was not that they did not belong to the Yangtze River landscapes; they just did not belong to the concept of Yangtze The Mother River.**

### **3. Communicating with Yangtze residents**

My repeated visits to Chongqing enabled me to constantly converse with the local people. I am a native Mandarin speaker and had no obstacle in communicating with them. I did not conduct formal interviews, only chatted with them leisurely. However, I treated the content as part of my research data, and paid attention to how the locals viewed the river. Below are some examples:

My diary from 27<sup>th</sup> March 2011 during the trial Point System road trip:

*In the morning I woke up in the mist of the river and the songs of the birds. It had been a while for me to stand somewhere without skyscrapers and traffic noise. Our host came up and started talking to me. 'From this bend to that bend, this river belongs to me. I rented it from the government ten years ago.' He began by swinging his arms along the river. According to him, this river section had deep water and no reef. It was an ideal location for a port. Once the development began, they would have to pay him rent, and he would make a fortune. Apart from the river, 'The sand, the stones, the shop and the port, in fact, everything here belongs to me. Whoever wants it will have to pay for it.' He carried on, 'If you live next to the mountain, you "eat" from the mountain; if you live next to the river, you "eat" from the river. When the time comes, I will be able to send my grandson to a military school. He will become an army officer and our family will no longer be peasants. To invest, you need to have a vision, and to take risks.'*



**Plate 18 Yan Wang Preston** *Our hostel hosts, the want-to-be local landlords.* March 2011.

Such ambitions by an ordinary Yangtze resident reveal how the impulses of having a better life prevail. It is possible that his vision is partly a result of China's ideological propaganda. However, is it not a genuine desire for people to make their lives better? How sustainable their methods may be is another question.

A brief conversation between me and Mr Xing (幸先生), one of my swimming guides, is recorded here:

*Me: So what does the river mean to you?*

*Xing: (looking confused) Err, just somewhere we go swimming every day.*



Plate 19 Yan Wang Preston, *The Yangtze Swimmers (my swimming guides)*, August 2012.

The life story of Mr He, a homeless man who previously worked as ground crew for the American volunteer pilots team Flying Tigers in the Second World War:

*'After the war finished, we were chased after by the Liberation Army. I ran out places to go and thought about throwing myself into the river. I had kept my gun and a few bullets for this purpose. But then I thought of my parents. They brought us to this world to live, not to die like this. So I threw the gun into the river and ran to the mountains.'*

Stories like this tell me that instead of being a celebrated ideal, the Yangtze is simply a waterway that flows into our lives, which are full of hope, sorrow and perhaps death. Our relationship with it is complex and intimate.





Plate 20 Yan Wang Preston, *Mr He*, Chongqing, September 2012.

Lady Hu (胡婆婆) is a cheap hostel owner and a rubbish collector<sup>59</sup>. In order to plan a portrait of her, I asked her the direction of the sunlight.

*Me: Grandma, where is east?*

*Lady Hu: The river flows that way. That is the east.*

Lady Wu's casual answer had a 'lightning' effect on me. The 'east' has powerful implications. China has always considered itself a country in the east – an Eastern Giant. The sun rises in the east. The Yangtze River flows from the west to the east. Yet for Lady Hu, the direction of



east was simply worked out by following the river's flow. **There was nothing ideological or mythic in her answer. The river is simply part of her life.**



Plate 21 Yan Wang Preston, *Lady Hu*, Chongqing, September 2012.

## Chapter conclusion

*All the Chinese know they are fed by the Yangtze and flooded by the Yangtze; they know the river is their country's gateway and its major highway; they write poems about it and sing songs to it, they fight battles on its banks, they sign treaties on its shores, they draw water for fishing and washing and making power, they dump rubbish in it, they drown babies in it, they scatter ashes in it and pollute it with coal and sulphur and naphtha and the excretion and decay of every animal kingdom, and of humans too. They respect it, fear it, welcome it, run from it, hate it, and love it. More than any other river in the world – more even than the Nile, which also cradles an entire country and nurtures a civilization – the Yangtze is a mother-river. It is the symbolic heart of the country, and at the very centre, literally and figuratively and spiritually, of the country through which it so ponderously and so hugely flows.*

(Winchester, 1996: 13)

The experiences gained in my first four trips to the Yangtze River environment involved visiting selected locations, making artwork, living in certain localities and interacting with Yangtze residents. During this process, information collected from all my senses and organs, including my skin, hands and body, was reflected on with the context of my existing knowledge and prejudices of China and the Yangtze River, as well as the theories, politics and practices of landscape imagery. If the sensual information can be seen as the raw 'data', then the reflection and contextualisation is what help make sense of such information. Through this period of research, one critical insight was generated: Yangtze The Mother River was a constructed myth contributing to the naturalisation of China's modernisation ideology. Regional hierarchy and photographic celebration are two main characters in this myth, which could possibly be challenged using photographic means. Complexity, instead of binaries between people and their environment, between nature and culture, between the traditional and the modern, between the borderlands and central China, can be explored further. Vernacular landscapes along the physical river, with their complexity and lack of visibility, can be used as a relatively novel vehicle to provide a critical commentary and a new narrative on Yangtze The Mother River. Interestingly, I found non-Chinese writer Simon Winchester's

summary (as quoted at the start of this section) of Yangtze The Mother River the closest to what I found during this research stage.

Within the different research methods, my artistic practice served as a central point. Such practice, in ways of observational photography and beyond, is rooted in an experiential approach. The power of this approach lies in its potential for a personal and physical relationship between the artist and their environment. It was one thing to study Google Earth maps and to conduct all sorts of contextual research, but it was a completely different thing to put one's body into the real scale of the landscape and generate an understanding from this. No contextual, archival or historical research can replace the value of personal experiences, which may include all sensory information and emotional responses unique only to the researcher. In this process, the artist-researcher's own historicity and prejudices can be exposed and further investigated. In my own case, through experiencing and photographing the Yangtze landscapes physically, emotionally and reflectively, I discovered my pre-existing ideas about The Mother River and my cultural position as both an insider and an outsider. This discovery contributed in drawing the context of my practice and in directing the theoretical research. It also clarified my photographic strategy, which was not to be 'objective', but to explore complexity within the landscapes with restrained emotional or personal input in the pictures.

Although observational photography also involves a multisensory experience, the way I experienced the landscapes went beyond observational. My tactile interventions formed a 'skinscape' of the land, supplying information that is impossible to gain by any other method and is free from visual aesthetic conventions. To touch and alter are just as important as research methods for a photographer! Through my social engagements with the Yangtze residents, I also discovered many first-hand stories reflecting the vernacularity and

complexity of their relationship with the physical and mythical river. Here I borrow the concept of *emplacement* raised by David Howes, where he looks at ‘the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment. This environment is both physical and social, as is well illustrated by the bundle of sensory and social values contained in the feeling of “home”’ (2005: 7). Needless to say, ‘home’, as a physically inhabited place, is the least mythic place to us. We know it not through representations or imaginations; instead, we know it through our bodies and we can often navigate through it even in complete darkness. In one way, the task here is not for the artist-researcher to achieve the feeling of being ‘at home’ in order to decipher myths. Sometimes it is impossible to reach this state. Instead, the objective here is to experience the subject in a manner free from the constraints of the eye, the visual and the known. Such a method may be particularly useful for photographer-researchers who have been heavily influenced by visual conventions in the ways they look and photograph the landscapes. As photographers, we have the tendency to rely on the eye as the main sensory organ and our self-assigned role as an observer in the process of working. To use the body and to interact are often not the first methods employed by a photographer.

Howes (2004) and Tuan (2004) stress the value of non-sight senses, particularly of touch, in generating a sense of knowing and knowledge. Cosgrove (2002) also writes that non-sight senses are lower down in the sensorial hierarchy in our Western, modern societies. Non-sight and the body are more associated with nature, savage, females and children, while sight and mind are more associated with culture, intellect and males. He states that

*the conventional emphasis on the visual and the visible in landscape forms and expressions is a logical outcome of its conceptual and historical evolution in the West. Many of the research techniques developed in the geographical study of landscape, from field work or iconographic interpretation, maintain the focus on sight, vision and image.*

Cosgrove (2002: 265)

In our normal life experience, it appears that the more educated we become, the more we spend time in books, theories and archives. The more developed our technology becomes, the less likely it is that we will go out to actually touch the world. Laptops, telescopes, Google Earth and satellite navigation systems can do the job of seeing for us. Technology is to take us away from even the experience of looking directly at the physical world. To touch and to alter therefore demands the researcher to step out from the established, modern and Western scientific knowledge system. The researcher is not an objective observer, but an active participant, even a shaper of her/his research subject.

Now was the time to begin the second phase of my practice within this research: to challenge the myth of The Mother River with a photographic project. This will be the content for the next chapter.

## Chapter V

### A Return to Photographic Mapping – The Y Points System



Map 8 A Google Earth map showing the 63 Y Points.



Map 9 An artistic map showing all the Y Points on the Yangtze River. The map is created to provide an analogy between the river and its 'function' as China's main artery.

In March 2013, having completed four field trips to the Yangtze River, I had come to a research crossroad. On a practical level, I had begun the project with a heavy influence from

the mapping photography analysed in chapter II. I had experimented with observational photography with and without a mapping system.

In the first and second field trips, I tested shooting five confluences and shooting at five locations 100 kilometres apart. Although the photographs were unsatisfactory at the time, they did open up a series of important questions and ultimately led to my realisation that Yangtze The Mother River was mythic. My subsequent theoretical and contextual research analysed the politics and character of such myth. I concluded that Yangtze The Mother River contributed to naturalising China's modernisation and its political unity. Some of this myth's key components are regional/locational hierarchies and photographic idealisation. Much contemporary photography has critically observed, reflected on and questioned China's modernisation with the focus on the Yangtze River. However, such observations tend to see the country's development as destruction and to place traditional China and 'nature' in opposite with modern China and 'culture'. Meanwhile, within this field of critical photography, a preference towards the iconic and political landscapes prevails. The long stretch of upstream Yangtze and the vernacular landscapes along the river remained ignored. The mythical status of Yangtze The Mother River had not seen a systematic investigation.

Such analysis pointed out that a systematic exploration into the complexity of the vernacular Yangtze landscapes could be a probable way to challenge the Mother River myth. This made me recognise the potential in a mapping system again. As a result, I proposed the Y Points System – to photograph the entire Yangtze River at precise intervals of 100 kilometres. The system was designed to tackle the two main characters of the Mother River myth: to subvert the existing hierarchies between river places and to enable access to the vernacular landscapes systematically. Meanwhile, I was to construct a pictorial and editorial strategy in order to explore the complexity of the river landscapes instead of proposing more binaries. To



further my understanding of large-format photography's function in documentary landscapes and their potential to subvert myths, I opted to use it for the Y Points System. To embrace my learnings summarised in the last chapter, I would allow myself to freely respond to the found landscapes at each Y Point as a way to embrace subjectivity.

This chapter will give an overview of the physical realisation of the Y Points System before providing a summary and some case studies of my discoveries along the river. It will then give details on how I constructed the images, and edited the books and exhibitions. It will present audience responses as external evidence of the work's critical capacity. Finally it will provide an argument about how the results of the Y Points System can be re-contextualised in relation to the content of the previous chapters and how it may make an original contribution to the critical investigation of Yangtze The Mother River.

**Supporting materials for this chapter include:**

- *Mother River* 2015 exhibitions' catalogue (Submitted with the thesis. A Physical book.)
- Installation images from *Mother River* touring exhibitions in China, 2015. (Appendix 1.)
- Mother River website: [www.mohterriver.info](http://www.mohterriver.info). Containing videos, diary readings and other materials (optional).

**Part I: The physical realisation of the Y Points System**

The Y Points System was a risky plan with unpredictable results. The first half of the river flows through the tough Tibetan Plateau, where high altitude, low oxygen and difficult access would pose serious, potentially fatal, challenges. The second half of the river flows through densely populated areas, where the landscapes may be drastically different and potentially repetitive. To carry out the Y Points System, I would need to utilise all my skills and experience. My previous experience of travelling in Tibet equipped me with some knowledge

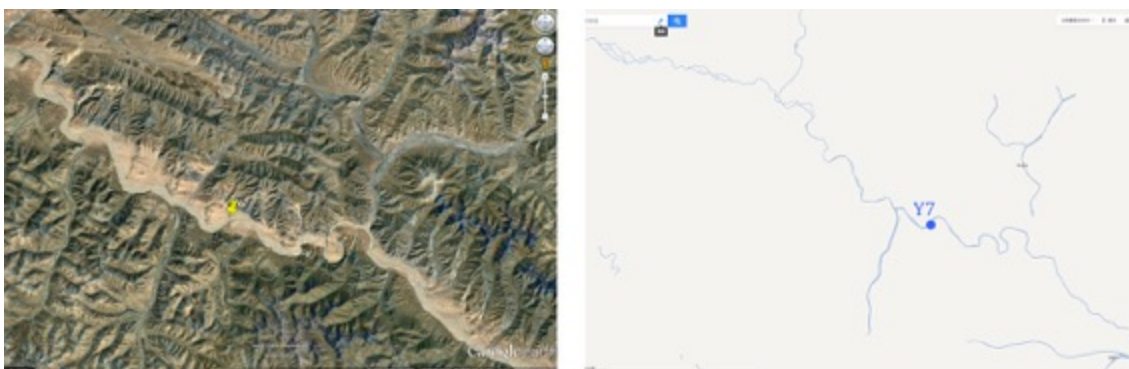
and sensitivity in dealing with local issues. My experience of living in China would provide me with some insights about the landscape and people, while my language skills enabled direct dialogue with local Yangtze residents.

The expeditions and road trips were designed based on safety and maximum chance to reach the Y Points.

**Table 1: Time plan for the Y Points System expeditions and road trips.**

On 1 <sup>st</sup> June 2014, I	<b>Y1–Y3 Test</b>	<b>Y4–Y8</b>	<b>Y9– Y25 Pilot Trip</b>	<b>Y25– Y37</b>	<b>Y38 Test</b>	<b>Y39– Y63</b>	<b>Y52–Y62 Reshoot</b>	<b>Y39–Y51 Reshoot</b>
	Nov 2011				Mar 2011			
		Nov 2013	Mar 2013	Jun 2013		Sep– Nov 2013	Nov 2013	
								May 2014

completed the Y Points System. In this process, all 63 Y Points were reached apart from Y15 and Y16. Lack of experience, personal injury and difficult access prevented me from reaching these two points. Meanwhile, the Y Points between Y39 and Y62 had to be visited and photographed twice. During the first round, I accidentally loaded the films back to front. I decided to return and reshoot.



**Map 10** The first step to realising the Y Points System was to locate each Y Point. This always began from the Google Earth map, which would then be ‘translated’ into a Chinese road map. In the case of Y7, maps provided little information for orienting on land without road. This was the situation for all the points between Y1 and Y8.



**DOC 29 Left: A monk near Y6 was providing us with local information. Right: A map of Y7, drawn for us by a local government official.**



**DOC 30 A Garmin e-Trex handheld GPS device was an important tool. GPS readings at each Y Point needed to match the original Google Earth coordinates as closely as possible.**



**DOC 31 Testing out the river on the way to Y5. 6 November 2013.**



**DOC 32 Left: Waiting for the light at Y4. 4 November 2013. Right: Our backup Land Cruiser crossing the river on the way to Y5. 6 November 2013.**



**DOC 33 Left: Car camping at Y6. Right: Morning exercise on the high plateau!**



**DOC 34 Left: A shaky picture after the dog attack at Y16. 16 March 2013. Right: The route to Y24 (can you see the scary path cut on the rock face?). 24 March 2013.**



**DOC 35 Left: Arriving at Y29, an uninhabited area approachable only by boat. Right: Photographing at Y45.**





**Map 11** In built-up areas such as Y38 in Chongqing, the challenge was the opposite to the issues faced in remote areas. The Points were easy to reach from multiple directions and the landscapes are multilayered. What exactly to photograph became the challenge.



**Plate 22** An image at Y40 resulting from my mistake of loading films back to front. 15 September 2013.



**DOC 36 Photographing Y63 at the river mouth. 16 November 2013.**



## Part II: The Y Points System evaluation

### I. The method itself



Map 12 A map showing the locations of Y43, Y44 and Y45 within the Three Gorges area. The original map was downloaded from [www.travelguidechina.com](http://www.travelguidechina.com) showing some of the main tourist sites in the area.

The Y Points System was proven effective at overlooking most of the sites conventionally seen as 'more important', iconic or 'photogenic'. Apart from Y1 and Y63 at the river source and the river mouth respectively, almost all Y Points fell on non-iconic locations – the places whose names and landscapes have never or rarely been linked with the idea of the Mother River. The most typical examples are Y43, Y44 and Y45 in the Three Gorges area – none of them actually 'fell' within the Three Gorges themselves. The Y Points System as a 'missing-out' strategy can be compared with Kate Mellor's *Island* or Miao Xiaochun's *Beijing Index*, which I discussed in chapter II (89).

The Y Points System provided an opportunity to access many areas in the first half of the Yangtze River that have never or rarely been photographed by outsiders.<sup>60</sup> This rarity of exposure can be demonstrated by an incident on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2013 when I was arrested while photographing Y35. The locals could not understand why anyone would be interested in photographing the river at such an ordinary place, so they reported me to the police. My

driver, a filmmaking friend and I were questioned separately for four hours before being released.

The Y Points System therefore became a systematic method to approach the vernacular or banal landscapes along the Yangtze River. Meanwhile, the equal distance between the Y Points implies an 'equality' between all the Y Points, therefore conceptually subverting the existing hierarchy between river places and sites. Under this framework, the pictures I produced would determine the meaning of the project. The following content reflects on how I constructed the images and their subsequent presentation.

## **II. Discovery along the entire Yangtze River**

My discoveries across the 63 Y Points support my argument that Yangtze the Mother River is a myth while supplying detailed information and evidence. From Y16 to Y44, almost every Y Point was within the flood zone of a hydroelectric dam. Most of the dams are located on the Tibetan Plateau. China's last frontier and its greatest natural power are now being modernised. The midstream and downstream areas of the river, from Y45 to Y63, are lined up with industrial sites: shipbuilding yards, (illegal) sand-dredging sites and small ports. Collectively, the Y Points reveal a powerful story about the scale and depth of China's modernising impulse, which now reaches its most remote natural spaces.

Under this general trend, the individual Y Points demonstrate a complex relationship between a myth and an ideal as well as between people and their river environment. It is difficult to determine whether their desire to have a better life is influenced by a myth or by a 'natural' inspiration of having a better life. Similarly, the landscapes at most of the Y Points are shaped by the combined effort of nature, a vernacular effort and the impulse of a modern ideology. Taken together, the landscape and stories at each Y Point reveal the complexities and physical

influences of China's modernisation process, in which expanding cities and intense infrastructure construction are creating impacts on existing ecologies and lifestyles. This is not to say that existing life stories are more worthy of conservation, or the old ecologies have priority over the new ecologies in cities. Rather, it reveals that modernisation is not a natural process. It is an ideology pushed with political force and convinced with the power of myth.

### III. Photography 'Ground Rules' made before the trips

- **To freely respond to the landscapes and stories at each Y Point without a concrete pictorial rule.** This decision was made for several reasons. Firstly, the topography of the Yangtze River changes dramatically from the source to the mouth. From the broad high plateau, it flows through some majestic valleys before entering the flat, low land in central and eastern China. Unlike Mellor's project *Island*, in which all the landscapes were unified by a central horizon, I simply could not see how such a unifying feature would be feasible on the Yangtze. Meanwhile, unlike Thomas Joshua Cooper who rendered all his geo-locations as near-abstract immersive water images in *The Extremities and the Emptiness*, I considered topographic features as important materials to reveal the complexity of landscapes and to challenge the Mother River myth.
- **To fully embrace my own historicity when constructing the images.** The experiences and understanding gained in the first four field trips told me that my own sensibility, knowledge and personal background are valuable and can potentially enrich the project. What I was photographing was the physical landscapes in front of me as well as *my* understanding of such landscapes.
- **To shoot no ruins, no pollution, no misty Shanshui-style landscapes, maybe even no obvious landmarks.** This was a reaction against the current trend of critical photography

on the Yangtze River, which has placed much emphasis on such political landscapes. As discussed in chapter III, ruins of old and pollution are worthy topics. However, focusing on them tends to generate a reading that places nature and culture, and modernisation and traditional life into binaries. Landmarks, such as traditional towers or famous contemporary buildings, are powerful icons often carrying too much ready-made meaning. The same applies to Shanshui images. I paid particular attention not to make images that are too similar to Shanshui in order to distance my work from the potential mythifying effect they have towards traditional China. But the issue of how to produce images after so many rules had been made would have to be worked out during the journeys.

#### **IV. Rationale during and after the trips: research; experience; observation; engagement; response; storytelling.**

Before each trip, I would study the available maps and search for relevant information about each Y Point. This usually involved online or archival searches for historical and contemporary information. Due to the nature of the Y Points System, many places yielded no records. But when information was available, I would note it down and digest it on site. During the travelling, I would absorb information while approaching the Y Points. On most occasions, the actual Y Points were always a surprise and different from my expectation. For some Y Points, historical and contextual research was also carried out after the field trip. In this case, such information would influence the editing and selecting process, as well as what text would be included in the book and exhibitions.

At each Y Point, I asked myself the same question: **What has this location got to do with the Mother River myth and its images?** I used the full spectrum of my senses to experience the environment: the temperature, noise, dust, and the earth/road surface that I stood on. I visually inspected the surface of the landscape: its topography, vegetation and geology. I paid

particular attention to the human marks on the landscape: roads, signs, houses, people, industry, infrastructure and so on. When possible, I interacted with people on site: who were they? What were they doing? What was their relationship to the river? The images are the results of this complex intellectual and visual exercise that cannot be generalised with a linear and purely rational logic.

In chapter II, I argued that the storytelling strategy was very successful in works such as Joel Sternfeld's *American Prospects* (79). Inspired by this, storytelling was adopted and developed as an important strategy used in producing *Mother River* as a series of sequenced images with text (to be included in books and exhibitions) and other information (films and objects to be included in exhibitions). The *Mother River* stories have several layers. Firstly, a story about each individual Y Point, including its geology, geography, people and events, can be represented within the pictures, in which a variety of considerations are taken into account for the visual construction (see section V for details). Secondly, at some Y Points, there would be no obvious 'story' to tell or event to record. This was accepted and actively embraced. An overall story of the evolution of Yangtze landscapes along its long course is formed once the journey is completed. Such overall story, the second layer of the *Mother River* story, can include dramatic moments but also banal scenes as well as landscapes with and without people. Following my own conclusions drawn from field trips and the literature review, I looked for complicity and diversity in each Y Point story and in the overall Yangtze story. Thirdly, textual records (time, location, selected historical/contemporary events) about each Y Point are provided in the book, placing the pictures within a more concrete context. Written stories with materials collected during the journeys and at some Y Points are also supplied to give crucial supplementary detail to the visual narrative. And finally, the unpredictability of the physical journeys was incorporated in the final presentation of the work, telling a story about myself and the process of the project.

It is worth pointing out that the stories were collected, interpreted and re-told from a relatively unique position of me as both an insider and outsider of the Yangtze landscapes. As an insider from China, I was able to converse with people fluidly to access first-hand information and to recognise signs, slogans and icons in the landscape. I could relate such information to some particular historical and cultural contexts. I was aware of the potential ethnic differences that may come into play in regions such as Tibet and understood the challenge of generating trust. Having grown up in China, I was also deeply familiar with its vernacular landscapes and was able to connect to it personally.

Being an outsider who resides in the UK, I was able to see China's landscapes afresh during every field trip. I am better positioned than most Chinese artists to notice the differences in the river's representation and perception inside and outside of China. I am more aware of some issues that may have more currency in the West, for example the environmental problems with China's modernisation. My context in the UK has also helped me to place the Yangtze River photography in a more international context, and China's modernisation in a wider and more historical perspective.

It was from this hybrid cultural position that I conducted the first phase of this research, reviewed photography cases on the Yangtze in chapter III and reached a conclusion on the mythic nature of Yangtze the Mother River. The same position continued to influence my understanding of the Yangtze landscapes and stories encountered during the *Mother River* project.

## V. Examples of river stories



Map 13 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y13.

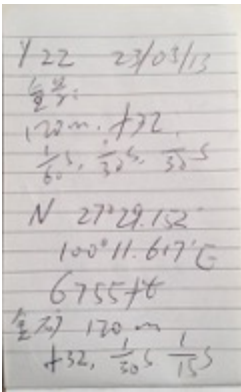


Plate 23 Yan Wang Preston, 'Y13 1,200 km from the river source'. From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

Y13 is a secretive location at the far western and northern border of Sichuan Province. It is not a tourist destination and is possibly only known by the locals. The Yangtze River here is the border between Sichuan Province on the left bank and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture on



the right bank. After much trouble, we arrived at Y13 and noticed that some illegal logging was taking place. Y13 is within the most densely forested areas on the Yangtze, where the primeval high-altitude forests have a very fragile ecology and are extremely slow growing. In the 1960s, this area was the main supply of timber in China, resulting in severe deforestation and flooding of the river. In the twenty-first century, the Chinese government has forbidden deforestation along the Jinsha River (the Yangtze River's name in this area) in order to protect the environment. However, this has also meant temporary financial loss to the locals. On 13<sup>th</sup> March 2013 when I arrived there, a small cross-river 'collaboration' was taking place. Trees would be logged on the steep and dense Tibetan side. They would then be tied together and dragged across the river to the Sichuan side before being transported out for sale (there would be no ethnic exploitation here, because residents on both sides of the river are Tibetans). Sometimes there would be passengers on the wooden raft – it looked like they were finishing work and coming home for lunch. I documented this scene of river crossing while placing the action in the wider landscape.



DOC 37 Left: My note for Y22. Right: A Google Earth map showing the location of Y22.

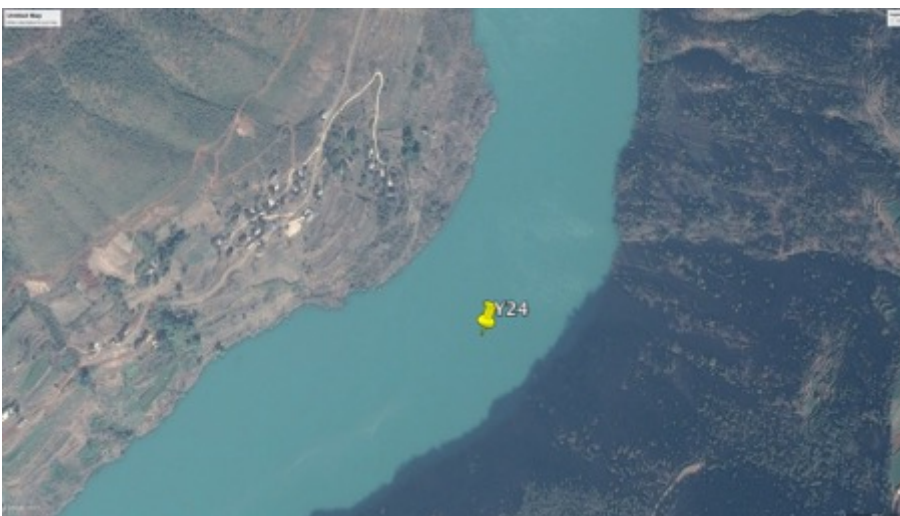


Plate 24 Yan Wang Preston, 'Y22 2,100 km from the river source'. From *Mother River* series 2010–2014. (The topography here would have changed considerably, because the area has been flooded by a dam since my visit.)

Y22 is in Lijiang, Yunnan Province. As a World Heritage Site, it is widely known as the 'Shangri-La'. There were five Y Points within Lijiang, but none fell on any of the tourist attractions. Y22 is 40 kilometres downstream from Tiger Leaping Gorge. Hidden in layers of snow-capped mountains, it was another secretive location that demanded much effort for us

to reach it. During the process of seeking directions from the locals, we realised that Y22 was the site of an illegal gold mine. Jinsha River, the name of the Yangtze within this region, literally means 'the river of golden sand' and has been a traditional place of gold panning. The Naxi name for the local village 'Caokedu' (草可都) literally means 'gold hole'. For safety reasons, we did not drive all the way down to the mine but parked on the mountain slope overlooking it. Before long, someone came to inspect us. Having gained his trust, we were informed that the local police had recently raided the mine. Now that the police were gone, they had resumed production. However, a hydroelectric dam, Liyuan Dam (梨园水电站), was being constructed not far from the mine, making the future of this operation uncertain.

Visually, the landscape at Y22 is majestic. Special high-plateau plants, marks of natural events and human interaction cover the surface of multiple layers of mountains. Such a landscape, with all its details, demonstrates the complex, intimate relationship between nature and culture at this location while resisting moral judgements on the individual elements.



**Map 14** A Google Earth map showing the location of Y24. (Note: the jade green water is a result of damming the river.)





Plate 25 Yan Wang Preston 'Y24 2,300 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

At Y24, another location within Lijiang, I collected the following story and recorded it in my diary:

*When we turned around the corner, I was overjoyed with the gift from the river. A group of young villagers were working hard on a battered rubber boat. While waiting for them to finish work before I could take a photo, we got chatting. This village was called Huang Mei Mao (Yellow Eyebrow), and this dam on the Yangtze was called Long Kai Kou (the Dragon Mouth). They were of Miao, a minority race within the Chinese population. The dam flooded much of their farmland, so they had little to do at home. Previously the river was very rough and difficult to handle. Now the water was still, therefore making fishing easy. They began to learn the new skill of fishing. The Jinsha River fish were expensive delicacies for the tourists in nearby Lijiang. On a good day, they could fish about 50 kilograms. And each kilogram would be worth ¥100 [£10].*

*But fishing was illegal. According to the government, it was bad for the environment. So they had to do it in secret. Apart from fish, they could also sell their trees. 'That one with purple flowers over there' – one fisherman pointed to our left – 'people from the cities would pay 1,000 Yuan for it.'*

*'But what would your family do without all your mature trees?' I asked. They shrugged.*

*One of them had also been working in the factories down south, making stuff for export. 'Did you like it?' [I asked.]*

*'Yes. It was not as physical as farm work. Only hands were needed. But it was boring. So I came home when I couldn't be bothered any more.'*

The landscapes and stories that I witnessed and collected in these regions are important. This is the frontier of China's modernisation process, where the physical landscapes shaped by the fresh clash between natural and human's powers are raw in their states and astonishing in scale. The forces and struggles of all parties are laid bare to be observed. In one way, the landscapes and lifestyles here were unfamiliar to me and were only touched upon in my work. But I believed that such forces and struggles are as universal to all of us and as unique in this region. I attempted to reflect this universality with its regional characters in my photographs.

There was a sense of pioneering when accessing these remote areas that were rarely photographed by outsiders. This put me into context with many of the early photographers on the Yangtze River, from John Thomson and Joseph Rock to Zhuang Xueben (104). As an outsider from the dominant Han people in China, my position could be troublesome. But I was clear of my own position. I was not photographing to reveal the poverty or injustice of this area. Neither was I celebrating the traditional and exotic lifestyle while condemning the damage caused by modernisation. I was there to explore the complex relationship between the river and its inhabitants as a way to demystify the Mother River. I adopted a relatively neutral political position, and avoided making exotic pictures in this region. There were no Tibetans in their full traditional dress, no intense blue sky, colourful prayer flags or golden temple roofs. I simply documented the vernacular aspects of their life. However, my very project to encompass the entire river could be seen as an unquestioned acceptance that the river does unify the different regions into one country. To this, I did not intend to contest and will leave it to my readers and history to interpret.



Map 15 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y39.



Plate 26 Yan Wang Preston 'Y39 3,800 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

By the time the river reaches Chongqing at Y38, it enters an environment with familiar histories and cultures to me. My image at Y39 reflects this familiarity. I photographed a view that included a historical Zhangfei Temple (张飞庙) in the foreground, a coal port in small

detail, the river in the mid-ground and a city view in the further field. General Zhangfei is a legendary figure from the Three Kingdoms era in the third century. This period was important in Chinese history and many important battles during the Three Kingdoms era happened in this area. One famous battle between Zhangfei and Yanliang (颜良) happened right here on the site of Y39. This 600-year-old temple was built to memorialise the battle, the details of which were written on the walls. To place the temple in the foreground as the visual focus and to include a large section of the river, I am acknowledging the historical significance of this stretch of the river. To include all the other elements, I am forming a 'holistic' picture of the multipurpose character of the place.





Map 16 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y40.



Plate 27 Yan Wang Preston 'Y40 3,900 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

The image at Y40 captures a moment during a local dance team's performance at a public square next to the river. The scene is slightly comical. Each dancer has a different facial expression: some confused, some unenthusiastic, and one lost. It also includes a political icon:

the dancers are carrying a portrait of Chairman Mao. The meaning of this scene is ambiguous and could be interpreted as highly political or simply vernacular. Their dance routine, costume and make-up are part of the heritage of the Eight Model Plays (样板戏), a set of model operas developed by Jiang Qing (江青, wife of Mao Zedong) during the Cultural Revolutions to glorify Mao and the radical socialism in China. Yet such dances are seen daily on almost every Chinese public square, practised as an exercise interchangeable with Tai Qi or other exercises to keep fit, to socialise and to pass time. What does it mean for such dances to take place by the riverside today? There is no direct answer in my picture, but its implications can be rich. If understood from a more political angle, the name of the public square, Fengdu County Immigrant Square (丰都移民广场), and the name of the dance team, Fengdu County Immigrant Dance Team, can potentially reveal more.



Map 17 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y48.



Plate 28 Yan Wang Preston 'Y48 4,700 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

The river stretch between Y45 and Y49 is very interesting. Traditionally, this was the area most hit by Yangtze floods. It was also the unfortunate artificial flooding zone. When the flood waters were getting too difficult to control, the Chinese government would normally release

the water into this area in order to protect major cities, such as Wuhan (located between Y51 and Y52). Now that the Three Gorges Dam has stopped all floods, this area has become a 'forgotten' terrain. My journeys through it demonstrated the history and devastation of floods, which became an 'education' on the Three Gorges Dam's positive function. However, the memories of floods appeared to still be fresh. The embankment, part of it as ancient as the Great Wall, is still there. Half-hearted maintenance is still being carried out, while animals and humans have made it into a multipurpose ground. Meanwhile, compared with the boom atmosphere elsewhere, towns in this area appeared quiet. Very few people are willing to invest here, in case the floods hit again. The countryside here appeared empty: most young people have gone to work in cities. This itself can be traced into deeper problems including the ecological consequences of the Three Gorges Dam (there is no fresh supply of fertile soil any more; traditionally it was brought by the Yangtze floods annually) and the implications of China's urbanisation. As a traveller passing through these places, I was limited in tackling all such issues. But I did try to reflect some of them in my pictures. In the image of Y48 taken in an abandoned farmhouse, there is a disused pesticide sprayer and a wardrobe covered by old-fashioned posters and pop-star stickers. This was the life left behind by someone, possibly a youth working on the farms.





**Map 18 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y61.**



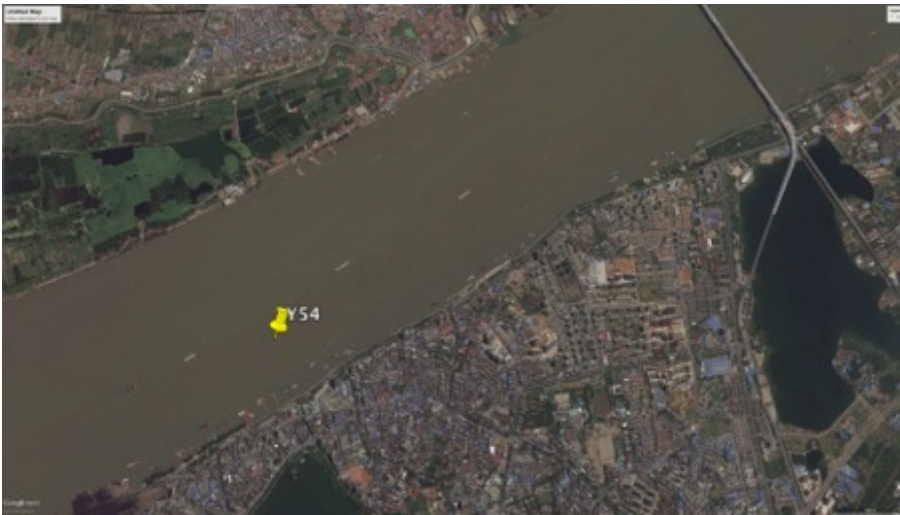
**Plate 29 Yan Wang Preston 'Y61 6,000 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.**

As the river gets closer to the sea and to the wealthiest area in China, new elements of the landscape could be observed. At Y61, a container port is seen in the background, a family was

taking snapshots on their iPad in the foreground, while an electrofishing party was entering the scene. (Electrofishing is forbidden but still widely practised in China.)

As demonstrated by the above cases, I was consciously looking for stories that would reflect the complexity within the vernacular sites that I encountered during the Y Points System journeys. Instead of a lyrical account, I looked for sociological clues and photographed them with restrained emotions. I then framed the views that would potentially – through the content and aesthetics – indicate, reveal or demonstrate such complexity. The Yangtze is a complex river with huge scales. It is impossible to tackle everything with one single photograph. Instead, I treated the 63 Y Points as 63 individual ‘pictorial essays’. Each of them deals with a certain (and often different) aspect of the Mother River myth. I sought variety instead of repetition, details instead of pure scales. As a result, although the images are fixed along the river’s linear course, they all contribute to a central question: what has this location got to do with the Mother River myth?

But how could I bring out such stories and context through the photographs? In one way, it is impossible to communicate everything with a single photograph since its meaning is highly unstable. At this level, my project shares similar strategies with Joel Sternfeld’s *American Prospects* (79). Some context can be provided by text while other elements will rely on the reader’s existing knowledge, which will lead to each viewer generating their own understanding of the work.



Map 19 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y54.



Plate 30 Yan Wang Preston 'Y54 5,300 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

At each location, I allowed myself to respond to the landscape both rationally and instinctively. By 'rationally', I mean that I could already explain why the selected view had something to say about the Mother River myth. By 'subjectively', I mean that certain views attracted me, although I could not explain why at the time. I wanted to embrace what I

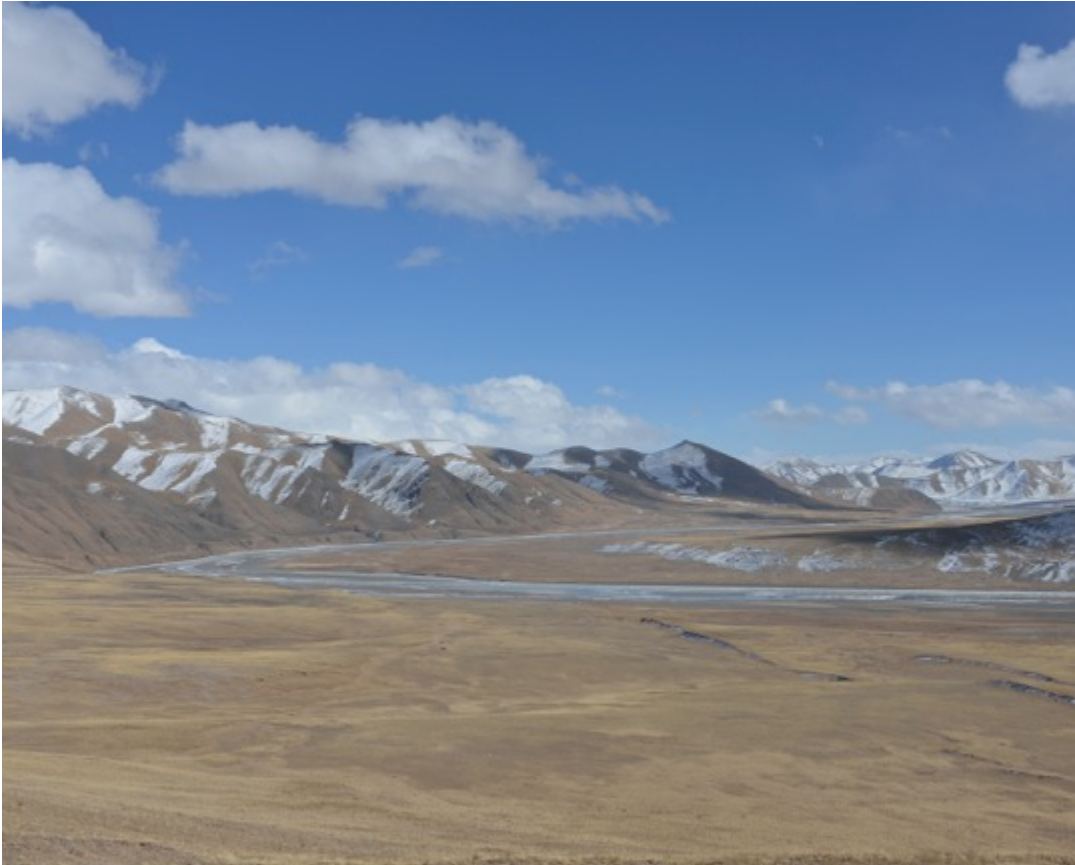


unconsciously knew but could not rationalise yet. To photograph following a Y Points System is often to encounter a scene with once-in-a-life-time opportunity. And similar to many other art practices, photography needs to test unknown water in order to find something new. If something looked interesting, then it had a certain quality that attracted my artistic attention. Whether it would fit into the project's purpose in the end could be decided later. The image at Y54 is a result of this 'respond and shoot' strategy.

## VI: Visual construction of the *Mother River* images



Map 20 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y7.



**DOC 38** An alternative view at Y7 with a blue sky. This view was rejected because it is too similar to conventional tourist pictures of Tibet.



**Plate 31** Yan Wang Preston 'Y7 600 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

I constructed the images visually with mixed influences and considerations. My main influence is from the 'topographic' or 'mapping' images that I analysed in chapter II (65). I adopted this 'mapping' aesthetic to create a critical distance in which the viewers are supplied with an array of information to make a judgement on their own. The overall intention is to make sure that readers will pay less attention to my (artist's) presence, and to read the content of the images. This aesthetic is alien to the conventional representation of Yangtze The Mother River. This unfamiliarity and reserved emotional distance are expected to alert the audience.

The Yangtze River traverses diverse regions with different climate and weather conditions. Meanwhile, the restraints of the Y Points System and the intense travelling schedule further restricted my choice on the lighting. But whenever possible, I sought overcast, even lighting to form a less idealistic and non-emotional atmosphere. I used a large-format camera, which documents the physical landscapes in crisp, sharp details across the image plane and which becomes an important source of potential meaning; I controlled the lighting, compositions and colours to avoid obvious affiliation to traditional landscape aesthetics such as the picturesque and the Shanshui – in either case, they could be seen as 'beautiful' and 'artful'.

I paid particular attention to scale. In reference to the 'casualness' of the vision raised by Stephen Shore, my primary concern was to shoot on a 'natural' scale. I used a 150-mm lens most of the time, which is equivalent to a 50-mm lens on a 135-mm camera – the lens with coverage most similar to human vision. I often took the photos from a 'normal' height, angle and viewing distance to avoid extreme close-ups, distant abstractions, or extreme contrast between different subjects. The illusion is that the artist simply 'recorded' a scene without 'artistic genius'.

In reference to my analysis in chapter III, the emphasis on the scale of the landscape transformation, often with the contrast of a small human figure, can lead to an imbalanced reading that stresses the overpowering effect created by modernisation over its people, nature and tradition. I understand modernisation as simply one episode in China's history, and that the complexity within this process is one effective way to challenge the Mother River myth. Therefore, I avoided rendering the landscape in extreme epic scales.

The scale of human figures is crucial because whenever they appear, they will become the focus of reading. During my journeys, I discovered that most Chinese people were purposeful, thoughtful and actively engaged in making their lives better at the riverside. They are not simple decorations in the landscape to give a sense of scale, or melancholy figures lost in the landscape of change, or victims of China's lack of democracy. For these reasons, I decided to give them a formal and purposeful appearance. When possible, I would include portraits and their activities; both are important in revealing their relationship to the river. Images such as Y19, Y24, Y25, Y31, Y40 and Y61 are all made with such consideration.

Colours are important. I rendered the colours realistically to avoid an obvious artist's presence. I avoided over-saturated colours often seen in tourist photos and amateur photographers' work or the pale, sepia tones that often evoke nostalgia or melancholy. But I did pay attention to the regional characters of colour and made a conscious effort to reflect them in my images. Some of the colours are associated with seasons and geologies, while others are human products. For example, from Y1 to Y10, the landscapes are covered in snow; from Y11 to Y18, a dry and wintery yellow-brown dominates the landscapes; the soil from Y22 to Y26 is a special red colour, which also makes the river water a red-brown colour in the summer; from Y46 onwards, the river enters flat terrain, where concrete material's grey

colour is dominant. By acknowledging the diverse regional characters, I intend to demonstrate that the Yangtze landscapes are far richer than a few selected sites.

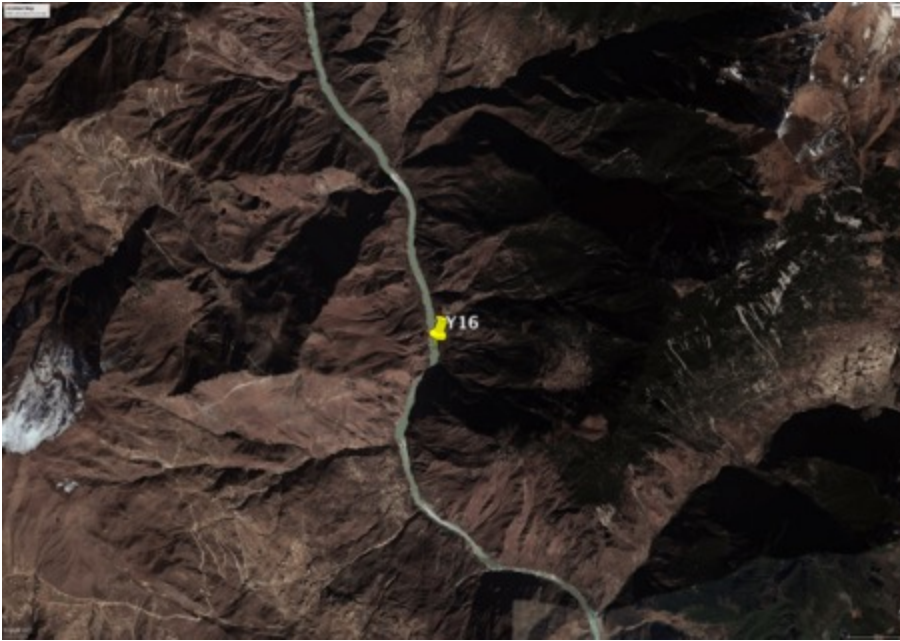
Looking back, how did my ground rules of 'no ruins, no pollution, no misty Shanshui images and no obvious landmarks' affect the shooting in real situations? Across the 63 Y Points, there were some locations where ruins were almost unavoidable; for example, at Y25 the entire village was flattened. Pollution was visible, but not a universal phenomenon across the whole river. A few landmarks happened to 'fall' on the Y Points, for example at Y58 where the ancient tower is visible. Towards the midstream and downstream areas, the weather is often misty and a large expanse of water area is a common view. In these situations, my ground rule worked as a starting point, a rationale that was drawn from previous conclusions. My job at each Y Point was to take in the real scene and then to negotiate it with my ground rules (rationality) and my subjective or emotional responses. The images at Y25 and Y57 demonstrate the result of such negotiation.

## **VII. The journey itself**

The journey formally began in March 2013, but the Y Points System was a continuation of the experiential approach that I adopted during the first four field trips between 2010 and 2012. With such an approach, the entire journey – the road, food, people, weather and river – provided rich sensual experiences and social information that continued to shape my understanding of the river environment. While the Y Points were the concentrated stopping places for observation and reflection, such reflection was always shaped by what I experienced before reaching the location. But experiencing the journeys was different from making pictures at Y Points. The question to ask here is what function the journey might serve for the critical intention of the project and how the journey may be represented.

While the answer was not obvious during the journeys, I collected various things, such as images of all the beds I slept on and the maps drawn by the locals. These became useful for the exhibitions later. Meanwhile, the live journey brought unexpected events, which demanded my careful response.

### **1. The unpredictable journey – the blank pictures at Y15 and Y16**



**Map 21 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y16.**





**Plate 32 Yan Wang Preston *Yeba Rapids*. The nearest location to Y16 that I reached. Notice the incense sticks in the foreground. A worker was killed by blasted rocks days before I reached there. Image never published outside of this thesis.**

Despite my best efforts, I did not reach Y15 or Y16. Y16 can be used here as an example. On the morning of 16<sup>th</sup> March 2013, I arrived at the Tibetan town of Gaiyu (盖玉), the nearest town to Y16. Within minutes, a Tibetan mastiff dog bit me. This incident limited my time there, since I needed to reach the nearest city within two days to get an anti-rabies injection. After washing the wound with soapy water, we spent two days trying to locate Y16 from several directions with help from locals. However, the weather and road conditions prevented us from reaching Y16.

I made the difficult decision to abandon Y16. However, I was clear with the reasons. The Y Points System has a 'heroic' element within it: a lone woman is trying to defeat all odds in order to reach her destinations and goals. To abandon Y15 and Y16 was to admit failure, to

acknowledge one's inability in facing nature's powers. The spirit of modernity and China's modernisation has much to do with human's systematic conquering of nature. In my personal case, nature was not to be 'conquered'.

## 2. The 'wrong' pictures: from Y39 to Y62



Map 22 A Google Earth map showing the location of Y41.



Plate 33 Yan Wang Preston 'Y41 4,000 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

On 29<sup>th</sup> October 2013, having travelled and photographed 24 Y Points from Y39 to Y62 for two months, I discovered that I had been loading all the films back to front during this

process. The result was catastrophic: many of the images simply had not worked, and others turned out to have severe ‘faults’.

I decided to reshoot. In May 2014, I made a final extra trip to re-photograph from Y39 to Y51 while being five months pregnant. The decision was significant because it clarified the purpose of the *Mother River* project. The project was not performed simply as a process-based work. It had a clear purpose, which was to challenge the Mother River myth with the photographs resulting from the physical journeys.

But the ‘wrong’ pictures, with their distinct visual quality, lead one to question the ‘authority’ of the Y Points pictures. A deeper question here is the credibility of a photograph as an accurate representation of a physical reality. The Y Points System relies on photographs’ authority of realism. For the project to achieve its desired effect, the photographs need to be accepted as a ‘transparent window’ to the real landscapes. The existence of the ‘wrong’ pictures is a living demonstration of the instability of such representation. To make this condition clear, I decided to include two ‘red’ pictures in the final sequence. With this inclusion, I hope to keep the project on its original track, while opening up dialogue towards its process.<sup>61</sup>

### **Part III: Editing and presenting the work**

After the real journeys across space and time, editing was a reflective process in deciding what the work is and how to present it. I intend to present *Mother River* to the public in two primary forms: as a photobook and as exhibitions. External factors such as time, budget, suppliers and social context will all affect the realisation and quality of these presentations. Below, I will discuss my strategy in editing and making an ‘ideal’ book.



## 1. Pictorial editing

Pictorial editing in this project means choosing one image from the multiple images that I shot during the field trips and adjusting the colours and contrast of each chosen image. I treated each Y Point as an individual story, so choices were made in order to form an overall series that best represents the complexity of the river and an overall sequence with the right rhythm, density and diversity. Once the images at each Y Point were chosen, they were sequenced to follow the river's linear journey. This was to present the changes of the landscape along its natural course.

The editing of colours and contrast follows my principle of supplying a 'natural' image. In this way, the colour and contrast were adjusted to stay aligned with the original physical landscapes. But I did de-saturate the colours and reduce the contrast slightly, to form a slightly understated impression offsetting the epic scale of the project and the landscape.



Doc 39 Four images shot at Y25. The bottom right was selected for the final presentation of the work.

Within the picture sequence, the blank pictures of Y15 and Y16 and two red pictures resulting from my operational mistake are included. The resulting sequence is still truthful to my original intention to challenge the Mother River myth. But with the ‘mutations’, it has added complexity to do with the process, the journey and human errors. I am yet to find other examples that have similar editing of a journey-based photographic work. In Thomas Joshua Cooper’s book *True*, the ‘Points of Inaccessibility’ are listed, which include a location with a failed picture (Cooper, 2008: 149). But the ‘failed’ image is not included in his overall picture sequence. This exclusion suggests that the aspects of human error and the unpredictability of his mapping project are not within the formal consideration of his work.

## **2. Book design**

Once the images are edited, chosen and sequenced, it is then very important to decide on the layout and the text. The main book layout was a ‘classic’ one emphasising each image as a plate to be looked at on its own, and then to be considered within the overall sequence. The images are presented as the same size, again to stay in line with the concept of the Y Points System: an anti-hierarchy system.

Text is very important in giving the images a more concrete context. I designed the appearance of text in several ‘folds’. At the beginning of the book, a full quotation of the CCTV documentary *Discovering the Long River’s* theme song *Song of the Long River* (29) forms the historical background of the project – the project’s purpose is to investigate the myths embedded in such a song. My Y Points Shooting Plan, the GPS numbers and the map serve as an overall introduction to the project. They also indicate the scale, which is expected to spark interest, to give authority and to encourage further reading.



The image captions are 'abstract': they only say how faraway this location is from the river source. This is a deliberate decision that I have made. Having been distilled from the physical world, the images are expected to form a pictorial space again, a space that is to be compared solely with the pictorial space existing in readers' minds of Yangtze The Mother River.

Detailed information is given at the end of the book after the main sequence of the images.

Below is a list of such information.

- The date of each visit, to place the images back into a concrete and contemporary time frame.
- Actual place names of each Y Point.

There are two purposes in providing this information. The first is to place the image into the context of a real place. Secondly, it serves a conceptual purpose. Most of these place names have never been associated with the Mother River concept, which is about well-known iconic places. However, in the list of place names that I visited as part of the Y Points System, it is impossible to find the familiar names that are associated with The Mother River. This itself challenges The Mother River myth. Meanwhile, naming a place comes with a history, which is associated with memories and real, personal associations. Many of the Y Points appear to be the 'blank' areas on common maps. However, I have discovered that they are all inhabited and named by humans. The areas 'remote' to us are someone else's homes. To list these names is to acknowledge their existence and individual significance.

- Selected information about each Y Point

Some contextual information is included to provide important facts invisible in the images.

For example, all the names of the hydroelectric dams are listed in two categories: constructed or under construction. The long list of dam names demonstrates the depth of the

modernisation of the Yangtze River. When it is 'constructed', it means that the corresponding photograph is in fact a scene of recent flooding. When it is 'under construction', it means that the corresponding landscape photograph depicts a site to be flooded soon. Both come with implied but unspecific political, social and environmental implications.

Some relevant, particularly historical, information is supplied. This is to encourage readers to compare their historical imagination with the actual photograph presented in my series, and to question the misalignment. For example, Y58 is a site celebrated by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai, and a site of brutal battles between the Taiping Rebellions and the Qing government in the nineteenth century. The landmark in the image, Jinzhu Tower (金柱关), stands on a hill that was an important elevated location during the battles. But the site today is a mixed-use port, as well as a shipbuilding yard and fishermen's homeland.

The stories of some individual Y Points can be extended into short essays. In the catalogue submitted with this thesis, such essays were not included due to the limits of time and budget. Meanwhile, because the catalogue was made for the *Mother River* touring exhibitions in China, I did not want to highlight more issues in case the book may be censored. But in future publications, I intend to add this element.

- Information about the physicality of the journey

I present a limited indication of the physicality of the journey at the beginning and end of the book. Does the physicality of the journey assist in subverting the Mother River myth? Perhaps not. But it does show the determination and the human endeavour of the photographer. This itself increases the credibility and authority of the project. But the epic journey is implied instead of emphasised. The resulting pictures from the different Y Points are the purpose of this journey.

Overall, the book is to be read in several rounds. In the first round, the reader can quickly go through the picture sequence. They are presented with a Yangtze River that is different from their memories and expectations. Hopefully, this will create a question mark that encourages further reading into all the textual details. They can then read the pictures again more slowly with the contextual information.

A bilingual (English/Chinese) monograph catalogue was produced for *Mother River's* touring exhibitions in China in 2015. Without an ISBN number, it was mainly for distribution between the exhibition partners. This monograph is close to my vision of the ideal *Mother River* book and is part of this PhD submission. However, some important elements, such as crucial stories at certain Y Points, are not included in this version. The formal *Mother River* photobook will be published by Hatje Cantz in 2018, for which selected stories in text format will be included.

#### Part IV: Public responses towards *Mother River* exhibitions in China

To test how effective *Mother River* is within the public domain, I put a lot of effort in to exhibit the work in China. To date, five exhibitions have been presented there, including three large-scale shows as part of the 2015 UK–China Year of Cultural Exchange. The exhibitions were staged in three major cities along the Yangtze River: Chongqing, Wuhan and Shanghai. Appendix I is devoted as a portfolio of these exhibitions. Here I will discuss audience responses towards the exhibitions.



**Doc 40** *Mother River* exhibition at Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, May – June 2015.

Art's effect on culture is as transient and gentle as dropping water on stone. A single project such as *Mother River*, at its best, is expected to momentarily raise a question mark within its audience's mind. Although not in a systematic manner, the media and public responses in China towards *Mother River* are reviewed in order to find out whether the work is capable of challenging the myth of Yangtze The Mother River. My materials include news clippings and statistics collected by various exhibition partners such as the British Council. I also personally collected comments and questions from conversations with exhibition visitors. The exhibition

context, the Year of Cultural Exchange, influenced reading of the work and emphasised my intention as ‘the love towards China’. However, sufficient evidence has been collected which demonstrates that *Mother River* has the capacity to challenge the myth of The Mother River.<sup>62</sup>

Below are some examples:

***An Unfamiliar Yangtze River  
The Strangest Primeval Landscapes***

*Living in one of the most important Yangtze cities, Chongqing, we all know the river as the beautiful and grand Three Gorges. However, the British–Chinese artist Yan Wang Preston, who has never lived by the Yangtze, photographed the river at 63 equally spaced locations and presented a Yangtze landscape exceeding your imagination. What kind of Yangtze does her experimental photography bring to us? Is there a view at a place with no view? Perhaps, with Yan Wang’s Mother River exhibition in Chongqing, it is time for us to inspect this familiar yet also unfamiliar Yangtze River again.*

(20<sup>th</sup> May 2015, Yu Press 渝报 (Chongqing’s largest local newspaper). Original text in Chinese. My translation.)

Fan Xiaofeng (樊晓枫), the Director of Wuhan Art Museum, in his speech at the *Mother River* exhibition opening in Wuhan on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2015:

*Mother River expresses Wang Yan’s<sup>63</sup> longing to her Motherland, and her deep love to the Yangtze River....I was born and bred in Wuhan and have lived here for almost 60 years. These are 60 years of living with the Yangtze River...Perhaps, because we’re so close to the river, we have been ignoring this great Mother River. Wang Yan’s photographs have revealed new characters of my old friend to me.*

(Original Chinese text supplied by the museum and translated by me.)

And another piece published online:

***Mother River Stepping Down from the Holy Altar:***

*I have just viewed a set of images called ‘Mother River’, created by the British–Chinese photographer Wang Yan. Her straight, level narratives affect me. It seems that the Yangtze River has just walked down from its holy altar and walked close to me...From a social point of view, Wang’s work can be labelled as ‘sub-cultural’ images, because her images are misaligned with the mainstream culture and the Chinese core value promoted in the contemporary era. The misalignment is reflected in the fact that there is no epic play of shadow and light, no grand narratives in Wang’s work. There is only the vernacular and the banal...sometimes so banal that it is meaningless. But this is exactly the vernacular river, the Yangtze flowing next to us...Wang Yan spent five years as an*

*observer, an involver and a creator to communicate with the river. She is a listener, a listener to the Yangtze River. It appears that she recorded the mother's changes according to the mother's will.*

*Mother River, temporal, banal, just like how real mothers are.*

*(By Cheng Jingwei 程静蔚, published on*

*<http://www.shmetro.com/node185/node186/201509/con114424.htm> on 16th September 2015, accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2016. Original text in Chinese. My translation.)*

Dialogues with and comments from exhibition visitors:

*Visitor (V): So can I understand your purpose as trying to reach these locations?*

*Yan (Y): No. My purpose was to take photographs after reaching these locations.*

*V: But your photographs are...they are not so great...not as great as how I remember and imagine the river.*

*V: Can I ask why you didn't take pictures of the famous places on the Yangtze River? They're much more worthy.*

*Y: But you already know about these places. I'm trying to show you the places that you didn't know about.*

*V: Oh. I see. Erm...it makes sense.*

*V: How dare you portray our beautiful and grand Mother River in this way? Perhaps you're just too young and too self-indulgent in expressing a 'personal' and 'immature' view.*

*V: Are you portraying the Mother River from an outsider, a foreigner's point of view?*

*Y: What do you mean?*

*V: Well, your photographs are very ugly; there is no beautiful landscape to look at. You seem to have adopted a position that is an observer, an outsider who has an objective and cold attitude towards the landscape.*

Such responses are complex in their indications. Resistance and denial are within the criticism of my work, which in turn demonstrate the deep-seated idea of the mythic Mother River. A hint of nationalism is present, in which an 'unloving' and 'objective' vision of the Yangtze is blamed as a 'foreigner's view'. This may point to other questions. For example, is the 'mapping' aesthetic understood as 'foreign' and therefore less desired? Does a foreigner have less authority on such subjects? And why? To answer such questions will take this thesis beyond its scope. For the purpose of this research, such responses can demonstrate that the



exhibitions did form an unfamiliar picture of Yangtze The Mother River to many visitors, who may have lived by the river all their lives. This can serve as evidence of the project's contribution to making previously unseen landscapes visible. Meanwhile, the less celebratory tone of my images can help to raise questions about my intention and aesthetic choice. For some visitors, this question can be extended to their existing idea of Yangtze The Mother River. Over 80,000 people visited my various exhibitions in China.<sup>64</sup> It is my modest hope that the project can at least function as one drop of water on the stone, with a temporary but definite effect on challenging the Mother River myth.

*Mother River* is beginning to be shown in Europe in 2017. The international dissemination of *Mother River* could potentially forge a fertile ground in reflecting on how a cultural-specific work is received in a global context.<sup>65</sup> However, enough material is yet to be collected in achieving a full analysis of such public responses in different contexts.

## **Chapter conclusion**

This chapter reviews and evaluates my photographic mapping of the Yangtze River following the Y Points System – to photograph the entire 6,211 km river at precise 100 km intervals. In total, this equates to 63 photographic points on the river that cover the altitude range from 5,400 metres above sea level to the sea and traverse the entire width of China. The resulting work, titled *Mother River*, has been presented as exhibitions and books in China to test its public effect.

*Mother River's* conception and realisation were fully informed by the experiential, contextual and historical research during the first stage of this PhD research. Such research reached a conclusion that Yangtze The Mother River is a myth with a historical foundation and a modern

ideological core. Formed within the context of China's modernisation, the mythic Mother River uses the Yangtze River's flow as an analogy to naturalise China's modernisation ideology. Photographic idealisation and regional/locational hierarchies are two main characters of this myth. Yangtze The Mother River is represented by celebratory images of iconic places and subjects: the river source and mouth, the Three Gorges, and new modern buildings on the river. Within the image pool of the Mother River, less celebratory images and vernacular landscapes are missing.

Following a mapping framework, the Y Points System was designed to subvert existing hierarchies within the Yangtze landscapes and to provide an opportunity to systematically approach the vernacular landscapes along the river – the type of landscapes typically lacking in the representation of Yangtze The Mother River. As a result of the Y Points System, many previously unexplored and rarely explored areas in the first half of the river have been accessed, photographed and presented with equal emphasis with images from the heavily photographed mid and downstream areas of the river.

My storytelling strategy has been to document the complexity of how the river and its inhabitants interact with each other. I was interested in the geology, geography, fauna and flora, and human activities and marks, as well as the stories that I could collect through conversing with the locals and through contextual research. When necessary, textual information is supplied to give the pictures a wider or more concrete context. In this way, each picture tells a small story and the sum of them is expected to tell a multilayered story of Yangtze The Mother River that is different from its conventional representation. I paid particular attention not to overemphasise subjects such as ruins and pollution. I carefully controlled the scale of the landscape and human figures to avoid an extreme binary reading.

I adopted a mapping aesthetic in which a constructed casual vision is presented and details of the landscape are rendered with clarity. This aesthetic is different from the common, celebratory aesthetic typically applied to images of Yangtze The Mother River. I anticipate that this 'uncommon' aesthetic and content may alert the audience. The viewers are given ambiguity and opportunities to have a more in-depth, cerebral engagement with the pictures.

Such a mapping aesthetic does not eliminate subjective or emotional responses towards the landscapes. The images are results of a complicated negotiation/collaboration between rational constructions and emotional readings of the landscapes. Similarly, the unpredictability of the journeys is an added layer in the project presentation to increase its richness. Taken together, *Mother River* has accessed previously unexplored areas of the Yangtze River and resulted in a systematic photographic documentation of the Yangtze River that has never been completed in the history of Yangtze River photography. Meanwhile, by exploring complexity of the vernacular landscapes along the entire Yangtze River, *Mother River* has formed an effective antithesis towards the mythic Yangtze as The Mother River. Such a large-scale and multilayered investigation of the Mother River myth has not been systematically completed by other photographers.

The two images at the river source and the river mouth, Y1 and Y63, are the most visually 'pure' in the series. At the two locations, I made only one composition. And at each of the two locations, I had the desire to embody myself within the landscape (touching the ice and rock at the river source; shooting while standing in the water at the river mouth). Meanwhile, at both locations, I was acutely aware that the actual places had complex histories and politics but chose to overlook them.

Does this mean that the mythical Mother River still has a strong grip on me? Perhaps. Perhaps this 'mythic unreason' is something that is difficult to shake off. My own personal prejudice in seeing the Yangtze River as our 'Mother River' is difficult to shake off. But perhaps the source and the mouth can also be understood as origins and directions. As much as they are idealistic, they are also optimistic and clarified.

# Conclusion

## Part I: Research Implications

It is nearly eight years since I first set off to photograph the Yangtze River. It is nearly four years since I completed the field trips and started writing this PhD thesis. This intense period has been a process of recognition - to recognise the (self)-imposed boundaries of what a documentary photographer is and what an artistic, practice-based PhD thesis can be argued. I have changed significantly in terms of thinking about and making photographs. And I am still developing my understanding on how to intellectualise artistic practices in an academic context, in which a western scholarship is largely expected.

Looking back, there were three most profound moments in the making of *Mother River* and one profound moment in the process of thesis writing. From each one I reached a breakthrough in the understanding of different, but vital issues. I will discuss them one by one.

On the 19th November 2011, I made a giant red circle with my bare hands on the frozen headwater of the Yangtze River at 5,340 meters above the sea level on the Tibetan Plateau. The act came after a long process of negotiating with my own 'principles'. I was not totally clear of why I wanted to do it. The materials I used were not from the local area, therefore having the risk of 'polluting' or at least 'intruding' the river and its environment - not very politically correct. But for a brief duration of time, I did not restrain my own sensitivity at all. Instead, I fully committed to self-expression. It was a rare moment in my artistic and personal life. The burning sensation on my hands and the heightened state of mind in which I temporarily forgot everything else in the world, are still vivid in my memory. It felt like a liberation. A liberation from reasoning and rationality. A moment of pure freedom. Through this act I achieved in expressing myself fully, and in finding 'The Mother River' by touching her.

The reflection on the act was equally important. Such reflection started by me making a photograph of the temporarily altered landscape with a large-format camera. The careful framing not only documented, but also helped to construct an iconic and pristine landscape. Personally, I became doubtful towards the critical meaning of my own acts and the landscape image. Is the act too ‘romantic’? Why such emphasis on the ‘pristine’ quality? In reality, a Tibetan nomadic family lived very close to the photo location. Their sheep were wandering nearby but did not get close enough to be visible in the picture. Such observations made it clear to me that my photograph was constructed under certain influences and desires.

It was out of the rational reflection and the doubts, that I carried out further performances along the river. Among them, the second most profound moment came when I swam in the Yangtze River on the 1st September 2012. The experiencing of joining the river’s flow was so overwhelming that it was impossible to describe fully by words. It was like joining all the people and history before and after me, who gave themselves to the power of the flow. There was a simple sensation of childhood joy. There was also an equally intense sensation of fear. The power of the water could kill, easily. A simple mistake in reading the water would potentially lead to death. In this moment, my eyes and my rational brain were temporarily suspended. There was also a slight sense of disgust - visible sewage water was coming into the river not far from my landing location. In this process, my body was doing the main reading of my environment. I had certainly ‘found’ the Yangtze River, but not in its visual form as ‘The Mother River’.

This time I did not attempt to construct any photograph. I filmed the entire process with an automatic, waterproof camera. A review of the video footage revealed a fleeting landscape that did not confirm to any existing pictorial mode of The Mother River, or any existing pictorial mode at all. This action of swimming and my reflection upon it finally led me to reach the most critical understanding for this project: that The Mother River was mythic.



The third most profound moment in making *Mother River* was on the 16th November 2013 when I photographed the river mouth in Shanghai. It was a moment with clarity. I had already investigated the local area, which was another vernacular site covered with smelly rotten fish, vegetable farms rented by migrant workers and a fishing village going on with their mundane routines. But I chose to turn my back against them and to face the ocean. I had my feet in the water while photographing a world with only the water, the sky and the light. It was an image of my mind, instead of an image of the external reality. I had fully embraced my subjectivity without feeling the need to apologise. But this confidence also came from experience - from the fact that I had travelled the entire river to reach this point.

After these profound moments, what has the resulting *Mother River* photo book become? It is clear that the images I produced were personal responses towards each pre-determined locations. The book also contains a 'mapping' framework, and crucially, the physical process that could not be totally planned or rationalised. All these demonstrate that one of the most effective methods emerging from this practice-led research is the embracement of subjectivity, the accidental and the uncontrollable. The fluid intersection of subjectivity and objectivity in the forms of action, photography, reflection, and adjusted action/photography. In fact, towards the end of the research when the book was edited, questions over 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' was never raised.

However, in the writing of this thesis, a long struggle was felt again, particularly in Chapter II. I was aware that the deliberate tension between objectivity and subjectivity in this chapter was constructed on loose grounds. Yet I had no solution towards this problem until the Viva examiners pointed out that there was a pre-existing binary between objectivity and subjectivity in the thesis. It became the most profound moment in my long process to write the thesis.

The core of the problem here has been how to articulate an artistic practice-based research in a taken-for-granted ‘scientific’, therefore ‘objective’ and quantifiable way. The difficulty is caused by the presumption that a PhD thesis, by default, should confirm to the established scientific cannon where subjectivity, intuition and tactile intervening are still suppressed ways of research. The binary between objectivity and subjectivity is deep-seated, social and not individual. I held this idea because of my own history. I have been a product of an education system based on modern and western science. I had begun to question such idiom in my practice but not in my writing, which was seen as an ‘intellectual’ act. The task in hand now is to work out how artistic intelligence can be written about without even going towards imagined binary between the subject and the object. In this context, the term ‘intelligence’ may be re-defined. To this task, writing this implication is only a beginning. Now, instead of attempting to re-write Chapter II, I would like to articulate my thinking about photography as a new writing test.

A photograph is, by default, a kind of document. Yet being a document of an objective reality should not be the end, or the sole purpose of a photograph. Instead, it is better to understand a photograph as an agent, an interpretation — and a departure for another round of interpretations. In fact, a photograph is both an expression and a document. When a photographer ‘struggles’ between subjectivity and objectivity, what the photographer searches for is a type of visual language and a communication strategy. Do I ‘describe’ the landscape and encourage the viewers to read into the physical details – colours, topography, people – before having a relatively more cerebral response? Or do I try to convey my feelings towards the landscape and hope that the viewers can have an emotional and imagery reading? The photographer is free to choose and to combine.

Apart from the scales, the difficulties and many other aspects, the *Mother River* project’s authority in challenging the myth of Yangtze The Mother River is expected to rely on its *documentary* character. An unsaid argument is always present: the view depicted in the photographs is an

objective existence, backed by the precise GPS co-ordinates. If someone refuses to believe the picture, then she can follow the co-ordinates and go have a look by herself. Yet this authority is only accepted if one accepts the documentary truth embedded in a photograph. When showing my work in China, often the viewers simply dismissed such authority. For them, there is no such thing as an objective truth in photographs. Their Chinese cultural background has firmly established the belief that an artist can only express what his/her mind sees instead of describing the world in front of them. In fact, I myself know this well. As my experience at Y63 demonstrates, a given location can have endless photographic interpretations. Meanwhile, two years after the completion of the project, I finally decided to include two red pictures in a updated book sequence — the pictures were the results of my mistake in loading the films wrongly. This act of inclusion is a self-subversion towards my own documentary authority. If these ‘bad’ pictures are also valid, then how do we understand the technically correct ones? Are they fiction or truth?

Putting a photograph’s documentary authority aside, what photography attracts me the most is the fact that the photographer is there. On a personal level, it reflects the photographer’s curiosity towards the physical world. That is why I choose photography as my artistic media. Meanwhile, by being there, it is possible to have first-hand information that other people might not process. This first-hand experience is exactly what I wanted for the *Mother River* project. However, first-hand experience does not always have to be backed up by an imposed documentary authority with precise location information. This brings to mind my final case study, *The Yellow River* project completed by the Chinese photographer Zhang Kechun (张克纯, born 1980), who I had the pleasure to meet recently.

The Yellow River is another Mother River of China. In fact, it is the cradle of Han civilisation. It was within the Yellow River’s catchment where the first China dynasty was established over two thousand years ago. For many reasons, such as environmental degradation and the lack of navigable

routes, the Yellow River has not been the centre of China's modernisation. Although still widely respected as the root of the nation, the Yellow River is often associated with the idea of a curse---the part of China that only reminds people of pain and poverty. Zhang Kechun was attracted to the river by the mythical ideal of the Mother River, or on that matter, the Father River. He (2014:5) stated that *'I want to feel the father-like broad and wide brought from this river, so I could find my the root of my soul'*. From 2008, Zhang made a succession of one-months trips to all the provinces along the Yellow River. He did not follow a 'Point System'. Instead, he freely responded to the landscape and formed a photographic narrative at the end without any indication of a 'mapping' authority.

Zhang's images are effective in many ways. The river's vastness is successfully and consistently suggested by a gentle expansion of white mist which merges the empty sky and the broad river into one. Under this vastness, constructions and small human figures forge a somewhat un-balanced, or even illogical, binary. Many allegorical images depict icons of Chinese myths: a giant golden Buddha, some deer sculptures and a Taihu Shi mountain. Taken together, his series is an intimate, subtle, and timely update of how this majestic river may be perceived by one of its children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



Ref 60 Zhang Kechun *Buddha in Coal Yard, Ningxia Province, 2011* From *The Yellow River* series

Image downloaded from [www.zhangkechun.com](http://www.zhangkechun.com) on 17/07/14

To combine Zhang's portrayal of the Yellow River and my own search for the Yangtze as the Mother River, I would like to adjust the position of my work within a wider context. It is true that I have much to thank towards the New Topographic photographers, who helped to establish topographic observation as a 'new' aesthetic in critical landscape photography. But my work is certainly a hybrid between documentary landscape, subjective reading and personal journeys. The 'sudden' ruptures in my image sequence, such as the blank pictures at Y15 and Y16, as well as the red pictures at Y40 and Y41, indicate that after much repression, my subjectivity is still bursting out. The difference between the observation and an interpretation can more vague and the story can be more fluid in my future work. In the same way, a more fluid way of thinking, and writing photography can be attempted.

A final word: there might be a sense of insecurity in embracing one's own subjectivity and intuition. After all, without the safety net provided by the touchable external reality, how do we

know whether a photograph or any art creation has ‘arrived’ at a poignant position? Perhaps, just as how I was certain about the mind image at Y63, the confidence comes with experiences - a knowing of the subject through deep engagement in all levels. Or, perhaps, it is precisely the unknown that is the most valuable, to the artist and to the viewer. I will take this advice for myself and explore the future of my art practice with it.

## **Part II: My original contribution to knowledge**

With the previous text in this thesis and my submitted portfolio of work, I now would like to argue that this practice-based PhD research has made original contribution to knowledge in three aspects:

### **I. Deep Mapping - a combined experiential and contextual research methodology with multi-sensorial and social emplacement as a key method**

My practice and the research were reframed from time to time as the project continued in the last eight years. At the beginning, I embarked on a journey with the unconscious mindset of an observational photographer and an unconscious search for The Mother River. But I was also consciously carrying a question: why the Yangtze River images seen in the West (such as works by Edward Burtynsky and Nadav Kander) were so different from what I remembered of the river (such as the mainstream media representation of the Yangtze as The Mother River in China). My documentary photographer’s role soon run into difficulty because I ‘could not see the river even when standing next to it.’ This reflects my unconscious denial towards portraying the Yangtze simply as an environmental victim. Such subjective stance was possible taken up because of my desire to have a grand and perfect Mother River, which was an extension of my personal identity as a Chinese person.

As this point the research changed direction. I gradually abandoned my role as a documentary photographer, and experimented with tactile performances in order to ‘find the Mother River’ and to gain insights about the river from non-visual means. Up to that point my ideas of the river were entirely constructed by images made by someone else. I dove into an open-ended exploration in a quest to find ‘my own vision’. I did not design all the performances in one go. The first one was a spontaneous act while all the other ones were designed to be a critic on the previous act. I continued this cycle until I reached a critical understanding that I did not know before. Yangtze The Mother River was mythic.

Having made this discovery through tactile and social research, I returned to a documentary photographer’s role by photographing the entire river at precise 100km intervals. But this time I fully embraced the entire process as an embodied research and the pictures are the result of this research. In this way, a holistic research method was not designed and then tested. Instead, it emerged slowly during the research process. The term ‘deep mapping’ was thought about during the reflection stage after the field trips had finished. The emphasis on this methodology, in comparison with the relatively standard methods such as the observational, archival and contextual, is its multi-sensorial and social aspects. Hawes (2004:7) called this method ‘*emplacement* - ‘the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’. Such method enables the photographer to become a temporary dweller to an environment that is both physical and social. In this research, the most crucial insight, that Yangtze The Mother River is a myth, was gained through such emplacement. Through immersive embodiment and interventions in the physical Yangtze landscape as well as direct conversations with the Yangtze residents, I acquired information impossible to gain from any other means. The river landscape gained new meaning when observed from my temporary position of an emplaced Yangtze dweller as well as a researcher.



I would like to briefly draw two case studies here to demonstrate how ‘deep mapping’ methodology— being off - map, relying on local information and even the day-to-day problem solving— brought crucial and new understanding about the Yangtze River. Such new understanding in turn directly influenced my picture-making and editing.

The first one was my learnings from the *Yan* performance, in which I carved 127 stones before placing them into a Yangtze tributary. The initial inspiration for me to choose Yushu as the location and carving as an activity, was gained through watching CCTV’s new documentary on the Yangtze River. In the all-celebrating episode about Yushu, the film described the local residents’ effort to carve religious stones and to leave them in the Yangtze River as a way to express their love towards the river. I envisioned a carving action which forced me to interact with the locals by learning skills from them and by purchasing supplies from them. Such social interaction was anticipated with an open question: what do they, the local Tibetans, think of the Yangtze?



Plate 34 Yan Wang Preston ‘Y11 1,000 km from the river source.’ From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

Through carrying out the carving action, my question was answered. I had observed, conserved, learnt from, as well as traded with the locals. It became clear that their act of placing carved stones into the river was religious —to build an imagined bridge for the souls of the dead. It had nothing to do with ‘loving the Yangtze as The Mother River.’ Some local teenagers even saw it as a superstition. Meanwhile, most locals do not even know the Yangtze’s official name in China, let alone regarding the river as entire China’s Mother River. Being unnavigable at this point, the river was not close to their daily routines. To them, it was merely a local river called ‘Tongtian’. Given the lack of information about the entire Tibetan region in critical photography and literature, it would have been very difficult for me to the local Tibetans’ relationship to the Yangtze River without having a fully embodied and social experience there. Half of the Yangtze flows on the Tibetan Plateau. This new understanding was a crucial step towards my realisation of The Mother River’s mythic quality.

Meanwhile, this understanding had a direct influence on my picture at Y11, the closest location to Yushu. The image includes a poplar woodland - a tree species that Yushu is famous for. In the focal area of the picture, there is a body part of a car, indicating an accident. A small detail in the background further gives indication towards the locality: some colourful Tibetan prayer flags. In the ‘Journey of Records’ towards the end of the book, the location detail is given. In this way, I intend to challenge the conventional impression of the Tibetan area. It is not just exotic, colourful or religious. It has its own dark sides and traffic accidents, just as how we have.



Plate 35 Yan Wang Preston 'Y28 2,700 km from the river source.' From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

The second case is Y28. This was the only point in the project that was accessed by a boat. While studying all the available maps, I knew that the area was 'blank' of any visible road or human settlement. Being an almost unnamed location, it was also impossible to gain information about it through written channels. I just had to go and see for myself. Upon arriving in the nearest town, we pulled into a garage in a hope that people there would know all sorts of drivers, therefore all sorts of local information on getting to places. Luckily, a young technical there was from a village 10 km away from my marked Y28. He became our guide. We arrived into his village and hired his uncle as the local guide. The uncle purchased a motor boat some time ago to rent to geologists and engineers who regularly visited this area in order to prepare for a hydroelectric dam on the Yangtze. He immediately recognised my Y28 on the map. "This is a massive landslide site currently being surveyed by the engineers'. He said. 'If it isn't treated properly, it'll slide down and block the river when the dam is built'. This became the only, and crucial information that I knew about Y28.

I took multiple photographs at the site, but decided to use the one showing the red river in the final sequence. This is not a very innovative image. The curved log and waterline may even appear slightly picturesque, which is something I would normally try to avoid. However, the significance of this image lies in the fact that it is a historical record. The Yangtze's water in its upper stream in the summer is typically dark brown-red as seen in this picture. However, due to the many dams, in most areas the water flow has slowed down significantly, giving time for silt to develop. As a result, the water is no longer red. Instead, in the most river stretches now the water is constantly green — a sign of 'dead' or 'calm' water. Y28 was one of the very few sections of the river that still had red water in the summer of 2013.

The fact that this landscape would soon disappear is indicated in my 'Record of Journeys' at the end of the book. Within which, it is stated that Y28 was within Baihetan Hydroelectric Dam's (白鹤滩水电站) flooding zone, and that the Dam was under construction at the time. As Y28 demonstrates, the journey off the road and the local knowledge all contributed to make a new story about the Yangtze River which would not be gained by other methods.

Going back to my understanding of myth and mythification, *emplacement* stresses an original concern with a place that comes from an intimate knowing and has little to do with representation or aestheticization. Such original concern of a place is primarily achieved by its dwellers, who shape their homeland over a long period of time. The resulted, inhabited landscape reflects their de-mythified view of the place. The significance of such landscapes is best understood by a river dweller - researcher who acquires both bodily and lived experiences of the place. Meanwhile, a dweller of a place transcends distance, which is another important factor in mythification. Such distance has several folds. The cultural 'distances' between different social classes or different countries can reduce the landscapes into an object of anesthetization, reflecting prejudices between

classes and cultures. The resulting landscape images can reflect the distance between the positions of a spectator and an inhabitant. Distance can be historical, for example, when viewing a ‘contemporary’ landscape from an adopted and mythical ‘traditional’ position. It can also be a technological one. Viewing a landscape from a satellite map, regardless of its rich details and large resolutions, can only generate a distant view with no real insights of the reality of the landscape. Distance, as an obstacle, prevents the access of first-hand information of the landscape while increasing the convincing power of representation and naturalization – since the viewer does not have first-hand information, representation will then stand in.

*Emplacement* can be argued as a feeling of ‘at home’. As a physically inhabited place, home is the least mythic to us. We do not know it through representations or imaginations. Instead, we know it by the body and we can often navigate through it even in complete darkness. In one way, the task here is not for the artist-researcher to achieve the feeling of at home in order to decipher myths. Sometimes it is impossible to reach this state – one can not always become ‘one’ with the research subject by swimming it. Instead, the objective here is to experience the subject in a manner free from the constraints of the eye, the visual and the known. Such method may be particularly useful for photographers who, by default, have often adopted a role of an observer and have been heavily influenced by visual conventions in looking and photographing the landscapes. In the context of academic research, to embody and to intervene are even further away from the established methodologies. For example, Elkins (2009:114) gives an extended list of tasks to achieve for an art-practice-based PhD thesis to be respected equally to PhD from other disciplines. The tasks include:

*‘A full literature review; a review of examples of enquiry through artistic endeavor in modern history; a sociology of artists; a theoretical basis for intuition; an advanced theorization of how knowledge may be embodied in or represented by a work of art; an aesthetics of artistic method as distinct from one of artistic style; a comparative methodology of artistic production across cultures; and an international consensus in the definitions and boundaries of those subjects loosely bunched as art and design...’*



Even in such a list, sensorial and social interventions are missing as formal research methods. To summaries, the phrase ‘Deep Mapping’ is adopted to describe my first contribution to knowledge in the field of landscape photography research methodology in which comprehensive experiential and contextual research methods are combined with a multi-sensorial and social emplacement as a key method. Here the term ‘Mapping’ refers to a systematic research, exploration and photographic process in which the aim is to discover previously unseen aspects of a given landscape. Meanwhile, the mythic ‘objectivity’ in geological mapping and observational photography is complimented by embracing a ‘deep’ engagement with the landscape – to touch and to alter it as well as to live within its inhabitant communities. Given the artistic nature of this research, the methodology of emplacement, when applied by other photographers, will undoubtedly generate different results. But new insights of a given subject matter will arise from the experiences.

## **II. A new body of photographic work titled as *Mother River***



Plate 36 Yan Wang Preston ‘Y37 3,600 km from the river source.’ From *Mother River* series 2010–2014.

The artistic outcome of my research, *Mother River*, is a series of photographs and text resulted from the Y Points System shooting method and presented in the forms of photo books and exhibitions. In the history of photographing the Yangtze River since the 1840s, no single photographer has completed such a systematic survey of the entire Yangtze River that covers many areas previously unexplored by photographers. Almost every picture from Y2 to Y37 was produced in areas rarely or never visited by photographers. Some of these areas, such as from Y2 to Y28, are difficult to access. But most of such areas have been ignored because they belong to the ‘vernacular’ landscapes which are not part of the Yangtze River’s existing portfolio as The Mother River or as the case study of China’s environmental degradation. A case study at Y37 can demonstrate the uncommon quality of some of the most common landscapes along the Yangtze. On the day I was arrested, together with my driver and an accompanying filmmaker. The suspicious arose because no one had ever photographed in such an ordinary area. The locals could not understand why on earth I was there with the camera. They reported us to the police officer. As a result, we were detained and questioned for over four hours. Upon release, I made a photograph of just the river water, with a view to remind myself what I was doing there.

The river is changing fast with China’s modernisation. Many locations that I photographed have already been flooded by new dams, making the photographs historical documents. For example, all the images from Y21 to Y38 were taken in a yet-to-be-completed dam zone. Many of the photo locations, such as Y22 and Y25, have already been flooded since my visit. Other areas below the Three Gorges Dam (below Y45) are also going through another round of industrialisation. For example, Y53 is in the process of becoming a port while Y58 will be transformed into a modern port. The historical value of these images are enhanced by the accompanying GPS co-ordinates and Google Earth Maps, making it possible to re-visit the exact location in the future and conduct comparative research. Such value is also enhanced by my topographical strategy. In many (but not



all) areas, I strived to document the topography in precise details afforded by the large format camera.

Seen together, the image sequence in *Mother River* demonstrates the gradual changes of the river from the snowy high plateau to the industrial lowland in a complete manner never seen in previous Yangtze photographic series. On these grounds, the images resulting from the *Mother River* project can be seen as a new contribution to the existing archive of the Yangtze River imagery, documenting its geology, geography and human life at a given time in history. This knowledge is primarily visual, enriched by textual information included in the books and exhibition labels. Such value can be demonstrated in the essay written by the English geologist Roger Mason (included in my submitted exhibition catalogue *Mother River*).

### **III. Using the Y Points System as a physical framework and storytelling as a strategy, *Mother River* challenges the mythic Yangtze the Mother River with a scale and complexity rarely employed by other photographers**

Each of the Yangtze photographers operated within a particular context with particular intentions. The images and text in *Mother River* are made with the intention to challenge the mythic Yangtze The Mother River of China. The Y Points System, applied me for the *Mother River*, subverts existing hierarchies between the physical river sites and landscapes, therefore loosening the ideological foundation of the myth of Yangtze The Mother River. Such a mapping method has never been used by other Yangtze photographers.

Within the context of contemporary critical photography on the Yangtze River landscapes in relation to China's modernisation, *Mother River* uses storytelling as a strategy while focusing on the complexities and diversities of China's vernacular landscapes along the river's epic course. Besides constructing images to form a visual narrative, captions and additional texts are used to supply

details of the stories and to form a richer context. Such a strategy, as well as its scale and complexity, has not been fully employed by other Yangtze photographers. From this angle, I argue that *Mother River* has made a new contribution towards the critical photographic observation of the physical impact of China's modernisation ideology.

Given the fact that the meaning of photographs is highly dependent on the context and the reader, the intended criticality of *Mother River* can be measured differently in diverse contexts. My own measurement is largely based on contextual research into the Yangtze River's mainstream representation in China and case studies of contemporary critical photography on the river. Meanwhile, comments from *Mother River* exhibition visitors in China serve as external evidence supporting my argument.

The end. 15 May 2018

## Note

<sup>1</sup> There are 56 ethnic minority groups and one ethnic majority group in China. 'Han' is the name for the ethnic majority group.

<sup>2</sup> The series originally only had a fervent theme tune. Following its immense popularity, a national call was launched for the most fitting lyrics. The translated lyrics were the chosen result.

<sup>3</sup> This figure is from the official website of The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China: [http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-07/26/content\\_17366\\_3.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-07/26/content_17366_3.htm), accessed on 28 May 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Information on historical floods of the Yangtze River is acquired from multiple sources, for example from *Jiangling Local History* (Wuhan: Hubei People's Publisher, 1990) and from Wang, Weiluo, 'The floods, embankments and the Three Gorges Dam of the Yangtze River' in *Modern China Studies*, 1998, Issue 3.

<sup>5</sup> This anecdote is referenced in many sources. Among them the most convincing is the essay *Interpreting Notes on Yueyang Tower* by Professor Li Shan, published on the website of the Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China. ([http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb\\_zwfw/zwfw\\_fwzt/fwzt\\_zhjd/201605/t20160527\\_246605.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_zwfw/zwfw_fwzt/fwzt_zhjd/201605/t20160527_246605.html), accessed on 2 November 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Wang, Weiluo 'The floods, embankments and the Three Gorges Dam of the Yangtze River' in *Modern China Studies*, 1998, Issue 3 王维洛, '长江水灾、长江大堤和三峡大坝', *中国当代研究*, 1998 Issue 3. <http://www.modernchinastudies.org/cn/issues/past-issues/62-mcs-1998-issue-3/461-2011-12-29-18-13-29.html>, accessed on 11 May 2016.

<sup>7</sup> A good example of *Jing* in the Western concept is the famous view that one sees while standing at Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park, USA.

<sup>8</sup> Two books have been particularly useful in grasping China's long search for modernity. He Ping's *China's Search for Modernity* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) discusses many issues debated within China's intellectual and cultural fields. *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History* by Jonathan Spence and Annping Chin (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) provides a clear and concise overview on China's turbulent history in the twentieth century.

<sup>9</sup> Information on the intensifying international fights over the navigation rights on the Yangtze River can be read in books such as Little, A. revised by Mrs Little, A., *Gleanings from fifty years in China* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd, 1910) (Digitalised book, downloaded from <https://archive.org/details/gleaningsfromfif00littuoft>, accessed on 12 December 2015) and from Chinese sources such as Tang, Runming (唐润明), *The Loss and Regain of Navigation Rights* (近代川江：航运权的丧失和恢复) (Downloaded from: <http://222.177.143.65:81/viewdoc.action?SID=59>, accessed on 4 December 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> *The International Development of China* was originally written in English. My source is a Chinese translation 建国方略 (*Method and Strategies of Establishing the Country*) published by China Chang'an Press in 2011, pp. 104–118.

<sup>11</sup> The information is available on the website of Changjiang Water Resources Commission of The Ministry of Water Resources: <http://www.cjw.gov.cn/zwzc/cjwj/jgyg/> accessed on 12 May 2016.

<sup>12</sup> This record can be found on page 232 of John Lucid Savage's *Biographical Memoir*, published by the National Academy of Sciences (USA). Available on <http://www.nasonline.org/member-directory/deceased-members/20000774.html>, accessed on 25 January 2016.

<sup>13</sup> A detailed account of China's environmental disasters under Mao's regime can be read in Shapiro, Judith *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Huang Jianpeng 'A Brief History of Photography in New China 1949–1968' in *Chinese Photography: Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Beijing: Three Shadow Press Limited, 2015) 黄建鹏 '1949–1968 新中国摄影史略' *中国摄影：二十世纪以来* (北京: 三影堂摄影艺术中心, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> The size of the print run is acquired from several online sources, among them the most creditable one is by Huang, Jianguang. *Xue Zijiang – the Most Important Landscape Photography in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century China*. 黄建光, 20 世纪中国最重要的风光摄影大师薛子江. (Source: <http://photo.sina.com.cn/zt/oldphotos/2014-11-13/1326385.shtml> accessed on 13 Nov 2015).

<sup>16</sup> A detailed analysis of how Carleton Watkins' work promoted the human development of the American West can be found in 'Territorial Photography' by Joel Snyder in W. J. T. Mitchell (ed.) *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> The information is from Shui Xiaojie 'How Long is the Yangtze River?' 长江有多长? Published in *China National Geographic Magazine*, Issue 3, 2009. Available at: <http://www.dili360.com/cng/article/p5350c3da98c6f15.htm>, accessed on 12 May 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Shui Xiaojie Ru Suichu 'Searching for the Yangtze source' 税晓洁, 茹遂初 '大江寻源' published in *Chinese National Geographic*, *中国国家地理* 2006, Issue 2, pp. 118–139.

<sup>19</sup> There are numerous books on Ruscha's photobooks and works. The Tate website provides a concise description on some of them: <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/transforming-artist-books/summaries/edward-ruscha-twentysix-gasoline-stations-1963> (accessed on 01 November 2016).

<sup>20</sup> *Think Sunrise* (1646–47) by Claude Lorrain, *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24) by Caspar David Friedrich or *Clearing Winter Storm*, Yosemite National Park, 1940 by Ansel Adams.

<sup>21</sup> The chapter 'Environmental Challenges' by Steven Yearley in *Modernity and Its Futures* edited by Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: The Polity Press in

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Association with The Open University, 1992) is very useful in my understanding towards issues around environmentalism and the Green ideology. The reading materials included in the same chapter, for example 'Green Political Thought' by Andrew Dobson and 'Green and Growth' by Jonathan Porritt, demonstrate many of the problems and dilemmas faced by the Green ideology.

<sup>22</sup> 'Jem Southam, *What is a River?*', unpublished essay, 2011, unpaginated. Quoted in *To the Ends of the Earth: Arts and Environment*, by Nicholas Alfrey, Stephen Daniels and Joy Sleeman, Tate Papers no. 17, <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/17/to-the-ends-of-the-earth-art-and-environment>, accessed on 21 July 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted from an Ai Weiwei interview by David Ng. Web. <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/sep/13/news/wk-gallery13> accessed on 08 November 2015.

<sup>24</sup> This method of shooting is described in the news release by Alexander Ochs Private gallery, listed on <http://www.photography-now.com/exhibition/67458> and accessed on the 11 November 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from the text '*A Specific View: The Danube River Project by Andreas Müller-Pohle*' by Ulf Erdmann Ziegler. Downloaded from [www.riverproject.net](http://www.riverproject.net) on 30 October 2015.

<sup>26</sup> As stated in the 'Project Synopsis' by Andreas Müller-Pohle, accessed from [www.riverproject.net](http://www.riverproject.net) on 30 October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> The readings are from 'Water Values' listed on Müller-Pohle's website: [www.riverproject.org](http://www.riverproject.org), accessed on 30 October 2015.

<sup>28</sup> This sentence is from Cooper's artist statement for the 2008 Prix Pictet Award. Available at: <http://www.prixpictet.com/portfolios/water-shortlist/thomas-joshua-cooper/statement/> accessed on 15 Feb 2015.

<sup>29</sup> The two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) are commonly seen as the turning point for China's step into modernity. The following one and a half centuries saw some of the most turbulent periods in Chinese history when the country endured serial foreign invasions, civil wars, and ideological struggles. China's modernisation was developed within this process but did not take on full speed in its current state until the late 1970s. See Hanes, W. T., Sanello, F. (2007) *Opium Wars*, Chicago: Sourcebooks, Inc (reprint edition) for the history of Opium Wars.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, T. *History of Photography in China 1842–1860*. London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009: p. 1. The original quote was printed by Stanley Lane-Poole in *The Life of Sir Harry Parkes*, 1894 vol. 1, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Many other British travellers, business people and navy officers photographed the Yangtze River and the Three Gorges after John Thomson. For example, the English traveller, writer and photographer Isabella Lucy Bird (1831–1904) travelled on the Yangtze River from Shanghai through the Three Gorges. She then went north to Sichuan Province, reaching the border between China and its Tibetan borderland to the west before going down south to Yibin and Chongqing on the Yangtze. She published *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond in 1899* and *Chinese Pictures: Notes on photographs made in China* in 1900. In the early twentieth century, the

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British businessman George Warren Swire visited China many times and produced thousands of photographs to document his family business, John Swire & Sons Ltd. G. Warren Swire's father, John Samuel Swire, established The China Navigation Company on the Yangtze River in 1872. G. Warren Swire's archive can be found on Historical Photographs of China: <http://hpc.vcea.net/>.

<sup>32</sup> Thomson's other publications on his travels in China include: *Foochow and River Min* (1873), *The Straits of Malacca, Indo-China, and China* (1875), *The Land and People of China* (1876) and *Through China with a Camera* (1898).

<sup>33</sup> This quote is from the essay 'From Hankow to the Wushan Gorge' as the accompanying text for Plates XVIII in Volume III in John Thomson's *Illustrations of China and Its People* (1874). There is no page number. (ebook. Available from [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org), accessed on 12 December 2016.)

<sup>34</sup> A contemporary American amateur photographer to Joseph Rock, Sidney D. Gamble (1890–1968) also visited China many times between 1908 and 1932 and produced many photographs of unexplored areas of the Yangtze River. However, he did not publish most of the photographs. His work was rediscovered in 1983, by which time the historical context was very different from the 1930s. His archive can be found on Duke University Libraries' Digital Collections: <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/gamble/about/>.

<sup>35</sup> The Nakhi are an ethnic group residing in the northwestern part of Yunnan Province such as Lijiang area. They are also known as the Naxi or Nashi.

<sup>36</sup> A biography of Joseph Rock can be found in *Joseph F. Rock and His Shangri-La* by Jim Goodman (2006) by Caravan Press.

<sup>37</sup> This phrase is used in China; attempts to manufacture 'Shangri-La' by Benjamin Carlson, published on Global Post on 14 January 2014, available on <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/china/130213/china-shangri-la-global-economy-tourism-part-1>. Accessed on 14th January 2016. But such status of the new 'Shangri-La' has also been witnessed by myself. Since 2001, I have visited the region many times and experienced its changes first-hand.

<sup>38</sup> Shangri-La and Lijiang together cover a large section of the river: six of my 63 Y Points are from this region. To compare, the Three Gorges area also covers six Y Points.

<sup>39</sup> The book *The Chinese Century: A Photographic History of the Last Hundred Years* by Jonathan D. Spence and Annping Chin (London: Random House, 1996) provides an excellent reading of China in this era.

<sup>40</sup> The book *Master Long Chinsan's 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Collection* (Taipei: Long Chinsan Artistic & Cultural Developing Association, 2011) provides an overview of Lang's life and career.

<sup>41</sup> In recent years, there has been in-depth research into Sha Fei's work and his contribution to the making of China's modern identity. Notable publications include: Ho, E., *Art, Documentary, and Propaganda in Wartime China: The Photography of Sha Fei [exhibition catalog]* (Columbus: East Asian Studies Center, The Ohio State University, 2009) and Wang, Yan (王雁), *The Collected Photography of Sha Fei 沙飞摄影全集* (Beijing: The Great Wall Publishing House 长城出版社, 2005).

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<sup>42</sup> *Liangyou* was the most influential pictorial journal in China in the 1920s and 1930s. An equivalent to *Life Magazine* in America but ten years earlier in conception, *Liangyou* actively promoted art photography, photo journalism as well as the ideas of modernity in China. A recent English publication has been published as a collection of research essays on *Liangyou*: Pickowicz P, Shen Kuiyi, and Zhang Yingjin (eds), *Liangyou, Kaleidoscopic Modernity and the Shanghai Global Metropolis, 1926*, Leiden: Brill, 2013. I have not read this book personally.

<sup>43</sup> In 1992 I was 16 years old. I still remember the feeling when hearing about the Three Gorges Dam – a sense of helpless loss.

<sup>44</sup> Although drifting on the river appears ‘free and easy’, it was in fact the result of careful planning and strict control. The Yangtze in this region is a busy navigation route for many ships. Drifting on a wooden bed could have been very dangerous. To realise the project and to ensure his own safety, Xing Xin relied on his local connections. Friends from the local Maritime Safety Administration were in charge of ordering all the potentially dangerous ships out of his way. Meanwhile, rubber tyres were installed on the bottom of his wooden bed for extra safety. His father, a veteran Yangtze swimmer, stayed close by for emergencies. All such information was provided by the artist to me during a conversation that we had in March 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Noah Weinzwieg happens to be an acquaintance of mine (we used to rock climb together in China). During a conversation with him at Burtynsky’s lecture in Beijing in 2010, Noah approved of my assumption about the modelling village and told me about his efforts in finding the ‘biggest dumpling-making and chicken factories’ in China for Burtynsky.

<sup>46</sup> This information is taken from Kander’s website [www.nadavkander.com](http://www.nadavkander.com). Accessed on 12 October 2012.

<sup>47</sup> This quote is taken from Kander’s statement for his project *Yangtze, The Long River*, published on his website: <http://www.nadavkander.com/works-in-series/yangtze-the-long-river/single#2>. Date unknown. Accessed on 12 October 2012.

<sup>48</sup> The essay by Sean O’Hagan is titled *Nadav Kander’s Yangtze photographs show a people sold down the river*. The subtitle is *Yangtze – The Long River follows China’s chief artery from booming Shanghai past the millions displaced by development*. It was published on [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) on 20 October 2010: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/20/nadav-kander-yangtze-river-china>.

<sup>49</sup> This text is quoted from David Company’s essay *China Everyday*, first published in Polly Braden’s book *China Between* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2010). My source is from Company’s website: <http://davidcompany.com/polly-braden-china-between/>. Accessed on 15 October 2015.

<sup>50</sup> This sentence was written in my diary on 24 November 2010. On the day, I arrived in Fengjie, the town next to Qutang Gorge, the most upperstream gorge in the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Burtynsky and Nadav Kander both produced work in downtown Chongqing and in some of the counties as part of Chongqing municipal city. Other non-Chinese photographers,



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such as Alexander Gronsky and Ferit Kuyas, also produced work there. Numerous Chinese artists have created work in Chongqing too, for example Xing Xin, Ren Tian and Yan Changjiang. Most of their works can be found in the Bibliography.

<sup>52</sup> I decided to keep developing *Forest* after I completed *Mother River*. In March 2017, *Forest* won the 1<sup>st</sup> Prize in Professional Commission Category for the Syngenta Photography Award. The project is to be completed in 2018.

<sup>53</sup> For example, in Richard Long's work.

<sup>54</sup> The confluence of Batang River and the Yangtze River also marks a change in river names. Upstream from here, the Yangtze is called Tongtian River, while downstream from here, the Yangtze is called Jinsha Jiang.

<sup>55</sup> Mani stones are stone plates, rocks and/or pebbles that are inscribed with the six-syllabled mantra of Avalokiteshvara as a form of prayer in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>56</sup> When the work was presented to British audiences later, a woman said that she did not like my hat because it had a very Western style. In fact, I purposely wore normal clothes that were no different from the local's clothes. Hats like this one were sold everywhere, including at roadside local stalls, where I purchased mine. All I can say here is that the ready availability of this Western-style clothing can serve as small evidence of how far the influence of Western culture has reached.

<sup>57</sup> 'Jianshe' in Chinese literally means 'construction and planning'. 'Matou' means 'port'.

<sup>58</sup> The next year, when I photographed the river 1,000 kilometres upstream from this site, I noticed that the river was almost bright red, the same colour as the soil that it brushes. Please see photo Y28 in the *Mother River* catalogue.

<sup>59</sup> In 2012, an area roughly the same to a single bed's coverage cost RMB2 (£0.2) every night at Lady Hu's hostel. Not every tenant could afford a bed, some slept permanently on the floor. The living condition was appalling, although there was still a sense of friendship. These people lived at the bottom of Chinese society but they looked after each other.

In China, recycling is often carried out by the poorest individuals who have no other means to have an income. Lady Hu collected rubbish from the neighbouring area in order to sell some of the items worth recycling. Her income from running the hostel was not enough to support her.

<sup>60</sup> According to unofficial information, I was the third non-Tibetan woman to ever reach Y1. (The first two were doctors accompanying previous geological expedition teams.)

<sup>61</sup> At the time when I made the catalogue for the touring exhibitions in China, this decision was not clarified. So there were no red pictures in the sequence or the exhibition. I have switched two images with the red ones in the submitted catalogues to accompany this thesis. Meanwhile, the exhibitions in Dublin and Bradford both had two red images in the sequence.

<sup>62</sup> The information here was collected by the British Council and my own personal encounters with exhibition visitors.

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<sup>63</sup> My Chinese name, Wang Yan, is preferred by most media and people in China.

<sup>64</sup> Visitor numbers are supplied by individual venues.

<sup>65</sup> Although *Mother River* has never been understood as an environmental project in China, its public dissemination outside of China has often been associated with China's environment. For example, the title for a review by Charlotte Jansen on Artsy (03 January 2017) is *These Revealing Images Capture the Plight of China's Environment*. (<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-these-revealing-images-capture-plight-china-environment>. Accessed on 03 January 2017).

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## Appendix I

### A Portfolio of *Mother River* Exhibitions

This Appendix supplies images and information on three touring *Mother River* exhibitions in China. They were created with the critical intention of testing the work's capacity to challenge the idea of Yangtze The Mother River within the general Chinese public. To date, 12 *Mother River* shows have been staged internationally. But the three discussed here were the closest to my vision and serve as case studies.

#### Strategy for venue selection

When possible, choose well-known public venues that are not solely associated with contemporary art, since these venues will potentially have the maximum number of visitors from most groups of society.

#### Exhibition platform

2015 UK–China Year of Cultural Exchange

#### Exhibitions:

- Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, 15 May – 10 June 2015 (Visitor numbers: 54,682)
- Wuhan Art Museum, 22 July – 28 August 2015 (Visitor numbers: 16,000)
- The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai, 11 September – 8 October 2015 (Visitor numbers: 1,063)<sup>66</sup>

All three venues are within metropolises along the Yangtze River and therefore have the potential to introduce the work to long-term Yangtze residents as well as tourists in the cities.

Curator: Zelda Cheatle

### Curating strategy

1. Large scale. Large prints would be more preferable to convey the scale of the Yangtze River and my project. Meanwhile, large prints can reveal details of the landscape recorded by the large-format camera. As explained in chapter V, such details are crucial in describing the landscape and in acting as a critical agent in revealing the complexity and challenging the mythical quality of the landscape. Simple white frames were used to create a continuous flow between the works.

2. Emphasis on the images. This means that it would be a 'white tube', i.e. clean space with framed pictures lined up on the wall. We purposely avoided installations that may appear 'fashionable', 'shocking' or 'conceptual'. There were no flashing lights, noisy ambient sounds or high-tech installations. The pictures, not the presentation, would be the focus of the show.

3. Accessible human stories. This strategy was to add materials to demonstrate the process of the project in order to make the work more approachable on a human level while attaining more authority because it was really done by someone. The implied question was: why would someone try so hard to reach the hostile locations, only to make mundane pictures?

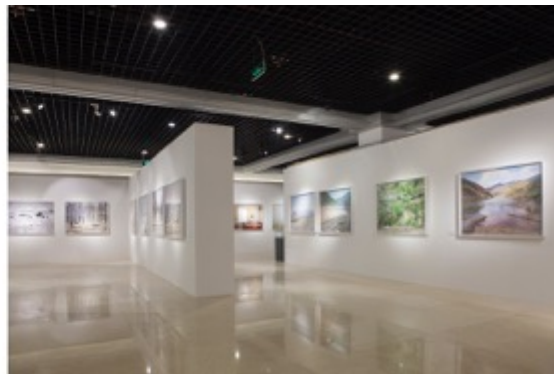
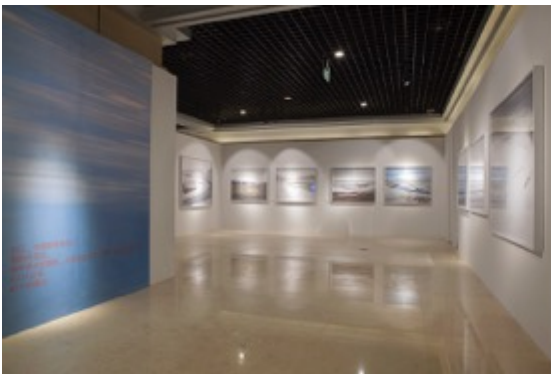
The resulting exhibitions included the following:

- Sixty-six framed prints. Eight at 1.5 m\*1.87 m, 58 at 1.10 m \*1.37 m. The photographs are the same in the book sequence.
- Three videos at two and half minutes each to show the 'making' of the project.
- A collection of objects: for example, maps, GPS devices, film boxes and hotel business cards to demonstrate the process of orienting, photographing and journeying.

- A set of 77 postcards showing all the beds that I slept on during the expedition and road trips.
- A set of labels, one for each photograph. The information is consistent with the book design, including the Y Points' distance from the river source, shooting date and location. However, other information, such as damming, was not displayed due to the censorship situation in China.

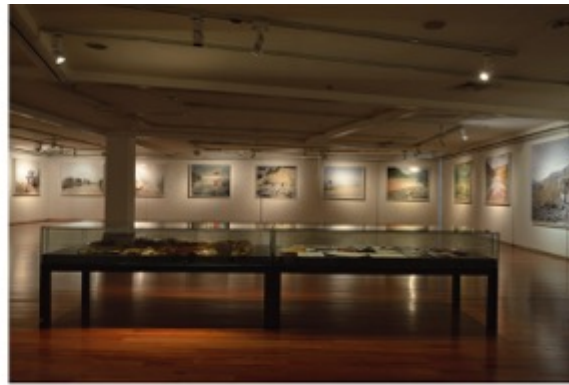


Doc 41 *Mother River* exhibition poster for Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum. The same design was adopted for all three touring shows. The three main characters are Mother River in Chinese. Since no single image can represent the entire Yangtze River, I decided to use this familiar term, instead of pictures, to draw visitors in.



Doc 42 (set of five images): Exterior shot of Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum with *Mother River* exhibition billboard; exhibition installation; visitors at the exhibition. This is a large-scale, multipurpose museum, which is also a centre for local education and a popular tourist venue. Its existing popularity ensured visitor numbers to the exhibition. Meanwhile, large-scale promotion through the UK-China Year of Cultural Exchange also helped to draw visitors.





Doc 43 (set of four images): Exterior shot of Wuhan Art Museum, with *Mother River* exhibition banner; exhibition installation showing the object vitrines and film projection; visitors at the show.



**Doc 44 (set of five images):** Exterior of the Swatch Art Peace Hotel (SAPH); *Mother River* exhibition entrance with map; exhibition installation with vitrine. Free-hanging style was adopted due to the lack of wall space. Although located in an extremely busy area, this exhibition received very few visitors. This is because the gallery is not known as a public (art) space, and therefore did not have an existing visitor pool.

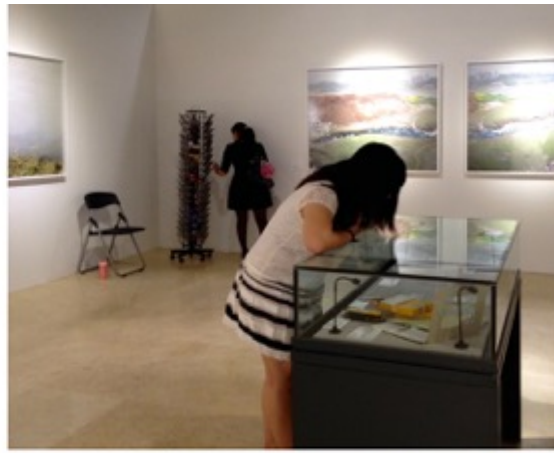




Doc 45 Installation shot at SAPH, showing the hanging of the two blank images at Y15 and Y16. In these exhibitions, the blank pictures were produced in a smaller size from the other images.



Doc 46 (set of four images): Crowds at the *Mother River* opening at SAPH. While in Chongqing and Wuhan there were mainly domestic visitors, in Shanghai the exhibition was also seen by international visitors. This reflects Shanghai's status as a cosmopolitan city.



**Doc 47 (set of three images):** Installation of 'All the beds I slept on' postcards at each of the touring venues. Left: Wuhan; Top right: Chongqing; Bottom right: Shanghai.



**Doc 48** A visitor taking photos of the caption at Wuhan Art Museum.



Doc 49 A *Mother River* map was displayed at Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum. Pins were provided, inviting visitors to mark their favourite pictures.



Doc 50 The *Mother River* map was also displayed at Wuhan Art Museum with the same invitation for visitors to participate. The two maps show some similarities: the pictures at the river source and river mouth appeared to be the most popular; the pictures at the Three Gorges area were the least popular (indicated within the yellow area on both maps). This was an interesting result considering the fact the gorges are usually the most photogenic spots.

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<sup>66</sup> All visitor numbers are supplied by the respective venues.